P06 / Governing technologies in Southeast Asia: (Re)Thinking digital tech and its policies from a Southern perspective

Topic : SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY

Chair : Stefan Bächtold (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)

Second Chair : Joanne Lim (University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus)

Third Chair : Gayathry Venkiteswaran (University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus)

Fourth Chair : Emma Baulch (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Beyond the truism that digital technologies permeate all aspects of societies, the assemblages of devices, cables, and data centres allowing for everyday connectivity are realising tremendous (geo)political, social, and economic effects. Southeast Asia is portrayed as one of the most dynamic regions (hyperconnected, datafied, and innovative) but also faces major digital challenges: In so-called ‘mobile first’ environments, both the opportunities (e.g., gig-economy, smart cities, e-government, infrastructure investment) and challenges (e.g., disinformation, surveillance, hate speech, cybercrimes, data breaches) of digital technologies shape unique policy worlds; and are producing ambiguous, complex effects on society (Bächtold et al., forthcoming 2024; Lim, 2017; Rasidi, 2023).

As in other regions, governments struggle to produce effective policies to govern digital technology (Lim, forthcoming; Leong & Lee, 2021), but Southeast Asian policymakers face different challenges than those underpinning the Chinese, US or EU policy approaches to data sovereignty or consumer privacy protection. Often, they find themselves at a particular disadvantage vis-à-vis the economic power of international (e.g., Meta, Bytedance) and regional (Grab) Big tech companies. As a result, the (socio-technical) imaginaries and framings of technologies that are underpinning most policies targeting the digital in the region appear to uncritically accept the hyperdatafied business model of current surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015) or data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2018). However, recent developments like the Indonesian government’s push back against TikTok and Malaysia’s social media platform licensing complicate this picture. At the same time, attempts to regulate digital spaces to curb hate speech or misinformation are often leveraged to silence and control dissent (Rasidi, 2023).

By taking a step back to critically evaluate both the realities and imaginaries of policy targeting digital tech, this panel questions the problematisation of digital technologies in Southeast Asia’s policy worlds. It focuses on a region of strategic importance to global infrastructure; and home to idiosyncratic digital environments, practices, and knowledges. This should yield findings that are not only relevant to academia and to improve policy regionally, but invites us to re-think theoretical concepts, policies, and understandings of the digital - globally.

Literature:

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Drawing on the sensitivities of critical policy studies, international political sociology, and science and technology studies (STS), this panel seeks to discuss the space for meaningful and effective policies on digital technologies in Southeast Asia. How can we think about policies to govern the digital that respond to the specific realities of Southeast Asian societies? What approaches are needed to address the inequalities of power between Big tech and Southern governments? How can policy actors in Southeast Asia develop agencies to carve out political room for manoeuvre, including creative (mis)use, (re)design, and (re)appropriation of digital tech and its spaces? What could policies underpinned by a positive, emancipatory, progressive political vision for digital technology and data justice in Southeast Asia look like?

For this panel, we invite empirical and theoretical scholarly research on the digital policies of Southeast Asia – their possibilities, constraints, and imaginaries. We particularly encourage scholars from Southeast Asia to submit abstracts that engage with concrete policies and policy worlds in Southeast Asia by reframing and critically examining concepts and theories originating from the Global North from a Southern perspective. We also are particularly interested in research that is based on knowledge co-creation with actors outside of academia; or that crosses academic disciplines.

This could involve, but is not restricted to, the following areas of research and questions:

What can we learn from past and present policies attempting to regulate the digital in Southeast Asia?
What socio-technical imaginaries are underpinning current and past policies, and how do they problematise digital technology?
How do policy actors build their knowledge on hyped technologies (e.g., AI, blockchain); and how do these knowledges shape (and are shaped by) policy?
How do national and regional policies in Southeast Asia relate to (e.g., translate, contest, appropriate) policies from other parts of the world?
How do concepts like data justice, privacy, or digital rights travel, translate, or (re)emerge within Southeast Asia, its policies, or political contentions?
How do large (digital) infrastructure projects (re)shape the policy worlds of Southeast Asia?
How can we make sense of attempts of Southeast Asian actors to (re)appropriate, (re)interpret, or (mis)use existing policies on digital technologies?
What localised actors, institutions, movements or regional actors and for (e.g., ASEAN) shape the policy worlds that regulate the digital and its material arrangements in Southeast Asia?
What are practical strategies to critically engage with and decolonise policy discourses of digital technologies, development, and progress in Southeast Asia?

This panel understands itself not only as an academic discussion. It is part of a broader effort to build networks and coalitions of academics, civil society, government actors, tech developers and communities to imagine and work towards data justice in Southeast Asia. We strive to integrate the insights and reflections from the panel into our initiatives with stakeholders beyond academia, and invite paper presenters to be part of our (ongoing and future) efforts to impact national and regional policies.

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Session 1Power, trust, biometrics

Friday, July 4th 10:15 to 12:15 (A2)

The institutionalization of open data in Cambodia: power, synergies and tensions between policy actors

Júlia García-Puig (Leiden University)

Open data initiatives emerged as democratic innovations in Western democracies, praised for their potential to improve government transparency, accountability and democratic control, empower citizens and increase social participation (OECD, 2018; Ruijer et al., 2024; Ubaldi, 2013). However, open data policies and initiatives have been adopted in recent years by governments across Asia that do not abide by those same values or are reluctant to enhancing transparency and accountability, and hence, have prioritize other goals such as attracting foreign investment or improving international legitimacy (O'connor et al., 2019).

Amidst such a backdrop, I critique that the predominant Western-centric approach to open data overlooks other relevant factors and rationalities specific to the political and institutional contexts of Southeast Asia. In response, I propose a power lens to address the question of how the synergies and tensions between state and non-state policy actors shape the development of the open data policy in Cambodia. By building on Barnett & Duvall (2005), I define power as the capacity of an actor to influence the design and implementation of the open data policy. The analytical utility of power appears particularly relevant considering that data in the digital era has become a deeply political issue for the new kinds of value it brings to many actors (Mejias & Couldry, 2019).

Cambodia's first open data policy is currently underway as part of the Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021–2035). Grassroots and civil society organizations in Cambodia have been particularly active at cultivating open data initiatives for over a decade, both locally and regionally. Therefore, there are now high expectations on the upcoming law that will institutionalize open data, and the potential public value it will generate. However, concerns exist related to the opportunities and capacities of non-state actors to effectively engage in policy-making. Such concerns are due to the poor transparency and accountability of the government, and the recent deteriorations in freedoms. The paper identifies i) the interests and preferences of national government, local civil society organizations, and national/international development organizations; ii) and the engagement strategies and mechanisms employed by them to influence the policy. The findings are based on the evidence gathered by conducting field research in Phnom Penh (semi-structured interviews, observation and document analysis). In addition, the findings seek to make a theoretical contribution by advancing the operationalization of the notion of power to study stakeholders' struggles around data policies.

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Believe in Malaysia: (Re)negotiating trust on social media and chat apps

Niki Cheong (King's College London)

Countries like Malaysia have a tendency to adopt policy to manage and regulate digital content (particularly in online spaces such as social media and chat apps) borrowing from long-standing semi-authoritarian playbooks where zero-sum games reign supreme – what is allowed and what isn't. These policies are often justified through the patriarchal lens of protecting its citizens from inappropriate and bad actors perceivably being a threat to both nation and individual citizens. However, scholars have argued that the state in itself have taken on these roles through hegemonic approaches in crafting policies where the media (digital and otherwise) is concerned.

In response, citizens have taken it upon themselves – whether personally or as part of civil society – to attempt to navigate said policies. One such approach is through the regaining of a sense of control (perceived or otherwise) through the ways they navigate digital spaces, including by relying on the features and affordances of social media and chat platforms. However, as the popular platforms – mostly developed and run in the Global North, such as Meta's Facebook and Whatsapp, and Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter and rebranding as X – increasingly adopt and adapt policies (and making changes at short notice) that are increasingly authoritarian, the nature of the discourse around this topic too needs addressing.

This paper draws on interviews conducted as part of several research projects between 2018 and 2025 related to the digital practices of Malaysian social media and chat app users across different generations to offer an empirical vantage point to some pertinent points of discussion. This includes young LGBTQ+ people's reliance on platforms (which they already know are not always conducive to their needs but is the only resource available in the absence of familial and state support, as per platform capitalism); the use of "verified ticks" on social media accounts by first time voters as part of fact-checking processes; and how older users (e.g. Baby Boomers) renegotiate trust where information exchange is concerned on chat apps.

These examples highlight the importance of centring the practices and experiences of online users from a cultural and geo-political perspective in policy discourse – whether state-initiated or by tech platforms – particularly where citizens from the Global South are reliant on platforms from the Global North.

Uncertainties and ambiguities of the digital ecosystem of post-coup Myanmar

Myanmar Researcher KCL (King's College London, University of London)

James Burroughs (King's College London, University of London)

Thais Lobo (King's College London)

Elisa Oreglia (King's College London)

Four years after the 2021 military coup, Myanmar's internet is characterized by persistent blackouts, prohibitive data prices, service blockages, censorship, and pervasive state surveillance imposed by the ruling regime. These challenges are further compounded by widespread economic hardship and declining public services, including frequent electricity shortages. Access to and use of digital services under these conditions have been analysed mostly from afar by media, civil society, and academia, focusing on shutdowns, ownership of infrastructure, laws and their implementation, and social media (e.g., Coppel & Chang, 2024; Faxon et al., 2023; Khine, 2023). Limitations to engagement with local communities and the lack of transparency in the digital sector—created by the country's political instability, international sanctions, and ongoing civil war—have made it difficult to study both the hidden realities of ordinary citizens' daily struggles to go online on the one hand, and of the back-end changes in ownership and operation of digital services on the other. Using a mixed-method approach, this paper proposes a ground-up understanding of how the invisible networks of technological materials and infrastructures and of geopolitical forces govern the digital experience of ordinary people. We argue that the layers of hidden material governance of digital lives are inscribing into digital technologies a set of values and biases that are tightly aligned with the current regime in power, but that will need to be better understood and unravelled when more democratic systems of governance can emerge in the country. Top-down understandings of the

current situation fail to capture the nuances of the constraints users face, underscoring the need to bridge the gap between future policymakers and the realities of users. We illustrate the invisible governance of daily digital life with two examples from our project that studies the expansion of Chinese digital technologies outside of China. The first example draws from a year-long ethnography to study mobile phone practices of low-income users in Mandalay, examining how they navigate various barriers to maintain internet access, and the moral dilemmas that arise from wanting to boycott specific services, but being unable to access alternatives to services that introduce a high level of surveillance into their lives. Discussing the examples of MyTel, or the boycott of Chinese apps and devices, and of KBZPay use, we show how little choice, control, and knowledge ordinary users have over the tools they need to carry on with their lives. The second example draws from an exploration of the back-end connectivity of Myanmar's most popular apps using a custom-made software, which showed an increasing presence of Chinese back-end services in apps that do not appear outwardly to have any connection with China or Chinese companies. Our work contributes to emerging discourses on digital governance in the Global South (Jiang & Belli, 2025) by taking a ground-up perspective on the effects of state and corporations' governance and reflecting on the spaces for agency of both individuals and states that do not have sufficient capacity to influence global debates.

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Digital identity, policy and rights in South/ Southeast Asia: A comparative analysis of India and Malaysia

Khetrimayum Monish Singh (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)

Digital technologies once began as experimental initiatives to support governance throughout Asia. Through several intermediary practices and third-party interests, it has now become a strategy and a critical component to transform the entire spectrum and experience of how governments and citizens interact with each other. The ubiquitous and pervasive use of the digital – devices, applications, platforms, biometrics, online transactions – has far reaching and significant social, political and policy implications for the region.

For instance, the current regime in India – through the 'Digital India' programme – has ambitious plans for a digital public infrastructure (DPI) using Aadhaar and Unified Payments Interface (UPI) to promote not only social development, but economic growth and the private sector as well. Similarly, several countries in South Asia (Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), and South East Asia are either in the process of transitioning to, or implementing digital ID systems (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, etc.); or already have existing ones (Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, etc.) to promote social security, financial inclusion, foster regional trade and connectivity, and boost the digital economy. This is indicative not only of the digital transitions within governance and economy in the region, but also of emerging developmental policies, concerns and challenges around access and participation; and the converging dynamics between law and digital technology through regulation, legal debates around digital rights and data safeguards.

So, while mobile phones, platforms and apps have changed the entire experience of government public services, social interactions and financial transactions, it is equally important to critically engage and highlight what this political economy of the digital means – in terms of digital rights, data protection and privacy, and policy formulation – for the countries in South/ South East Asia. This also allows for a moment to rethink and explore the role of government and CSO led initiatives and programmes for S&T communication, digital literacy and awareness, tech advocacy, and collaborative technology policy formulation and implementation with local actors and communities.

Building on this framework and through empirical data, this paper will explore ongoing experiments of digital ID systems in India (Aadhaar) and Malaysia (MyKad, NDID/IDN, MyDigital ID app) to draw comparative linkages of digital technology adoption, implementation and the subsequent challenges of digital ID systems, to help elucidate the co-construction of socio-technical digital infrastructural developments through the

everyday practices of data, data governance, tech advocacy and alliances around digital rights, and collaborative socio-technical work and efforts around technology policy in the contexts of South/ Southeast Asia.

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Session 2big data, AI, imaginaries

Friday, July 4th 16:00 to 18:00 (D2)

Understanding the Reaction of Indonesian Public towards Government Data Breaches in Indonesia

Irnasya Shafira (Monash University)

This paper presents the findings of a PhD project that investigates the perceptions and reactions of the Indonesian public across different generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z) to persistent cyberattacks targeting citizens' personal data stored in government databases. The study aims to explore how these perceptions may influence the future of Indonesia's cybersecurity policy, particularly in terms of state conduct during relentless cyberattacks.

The research addresses three primary questions: (1) How do the Indonesian public perceive and react to government data breach incidents where citizens' personal data are stolen and sold on the dark web? (2) What factors drive these reactions? (3) What measures can the state take to address public concerns regarding stolen data in government data breach incidents?

To answer these questions, the research employs a mixed-method approach. In Phase 1, qualitative interviews were conducted with members of the Coalition for Personal Data Protection Advocacy (KA-PDP), which comprises 28 member organizations. Sixteen representatives, designated as 'experts,' were interviewed to gather in-depth insights into their perspectives on government data breaches. In Phase 2, a quantitative survey was deployed to assess whether the general public's sentiments align with those of the experts regarding reactions to government data breaches.

The findings reveal significant generational differences in how Indonesians perceive and react to data breaches. Baby Boomers and Generation X tend to exhibit higher levels of concern and demand stronger government action, while Millennials and Generation Z show a more nuanced understanding of digital privacy and data security issues. Factors influencing these reactions include the level of digital literacy, trust in government institutions, and previous experiences with data breaches.

The study also highlights the importance of transparent communication and proactive measures by the government to mitigate public concerns. Recommendations for policymakers include enhancing public awareness campaigns, improving data protection regulations, and establishing clear protocols for responding to data breaches. These measures are crucial for building public trust and ensuring the effectiveness of Indonesia's cybersecurity policies.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on data justice, privacy, and digital rights within Southeast Asia. By examining the Indonesian context, the study provides valuable insights into how these concepts are perceived and enacted in one of the region's largest countries. The findings offer a peripheral contextual understanding that can inform the panel's research questions on the translation and re-emergence of data justice, privacy, and digital rights in Southeast Asia's policies and political contentions.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to cybersecurity policy that considers the diverse perspectives of different generational cohorts. By addressing the public's concerns and fostering a culture of data protection, Indonesia can enhance its resilience against cyber threats and safeguard its citizens' personal data.

Regulating AI in Indonesia: Interplay of Imaginaries, Power, and Interests

Dewa Ayu Diah Angendari (Leiden University)

The global race for AI regulation has intensified, with nations unveiling strategies to govern this transformative technology. Indonesia joined this race in 2020 by introducing its National Strategy on AI and a circular letter on AI Ethics. As of December 2024, the country is drafting a presidential regulation on AI Governance and developing a government regulation modeled after the EU's Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act. However, as previous research suggest, the global AI regulatory landscape remains dominated by resource-rich actors, raising questions about the power imbalances and imaginaries driving these regulations.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how policies on AI are made in Indonesia. It explores the interplay between imaginaries, power, and the political and economic interests of key policy actors. This research contributes to non-Eurocentric perspectives on technology regulation, particularly by exploring a young democratic state, but is frequently criticized for adopting authoritarian practices in digital governance

The research reveals three initial findings through interviews, observations, and document analysis. First, the imaginaries of Indonesian policy actors regarding AI reflect the dual nature of emerging technologies, simultaneously evoking hopes and fears. On one hand, AI is envisioned as a driver of innovation and economic growth. On the other hand, concerns persist about job displacement and the emergence of economic monopolies. These competing imaginaries are not unique to Indonesia's AI policy-making; the debate over technology versus human labor in the job sector has been a recurring global discourse. This narrative also frequently surfaces in broader discussions on Internet policy in Indonesia.

Second, these imaginaries are rooted in Indonesia's socio-political history, particularly the New Order era (1965–1998), which established bureaucratic and elite-dominated governance practices. Despite democratic reforms, these practices persist, with government and elites maintaining significant control over policy-making. Emerging technologies like AI amplify these dynamics as multinational tech firms use their financial and knowledge resources to shape agendas, promoting narratives about the inevitability of technological progress and the need for innovation-driven regulation.

Third, power in Indonesia's technology policy-making process is unevenly distributed. The government dominates decision-making through closed-door processes, while multinational tech companies play a key role in shaping the agenda during the early stages. Both actors frequently co-opt academics and civil society organizations (CSOs), aligning them with dominant narratives and limiting alternative imaginaries. This dynamic reinforces existing power structures, sidelining broader public interest concerns.

In conclusion, despite the novelty of emerging technologies, Indonesia's policy-making processes remain rooted in elite-driven practices, heavily influenced by political and economic interests, as well as the advocacy of big tech firms. The tension between fostering innovation and imposing regulation reflects an ongoing power struggle, where economic elites push for minimal restrictions to maximize technological growth. As AI continues to evolve and Indonesia's market expands, policy actors must critically assess the narratives surrounding regulation. AI governance should not be viewed as an end goal but as a tool to address societal challenges, balancing technological innovation with the public interest

Who is afraid of Deep Seek? Imagined global AI futures, geopolitics, and data infrastructure projects in Malaysia

Stefan Bächtold (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)

In 2024, several Western big tech companies promised significant investments into Malaysia's infrastructures for data centres, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence (AI) services. The Malaysian government has enthusiastically framed these investments in a policy discourse that imagines them as stepping stones to make the country into 'Southeast Asia's data centre' – a techno-optimistic socio-technical imaginary that positions Malaysia as a regional hub for the current version of Silicon Valley-controlled global digital development and AI futures. This currently globally dominant version of AI futures relies on endless datafication of societies, intensive (and expensive) computing, and massive server farms. For countries like Malaysia, subscribing to this model of digital development and becoming part of the necessary data infrastructures comes with promises for significant investments, but also the promise to create thousands of jobs and to help local industry move up the global value chain by enhancing their AI capabilities.

However, in early 2025, the release of the Chinese company DeepSeek's open-source large language model has created significant cracks in the dominant global imaginary for AI futures; as its model shows a

similar performance to Western models, but for a fraction of the cost and computing power necessary to develop and run the former. This has not only burst the AI bubble of Western tech companies in terms of their stock value. It also points to alternative possibilities of AI futures that are not relying on the computing-intensive, Silicon Valley controlled model.

This paper uses the DeepSeek shock as an entry point to decentre the underpinning power relations of the currently (formerly?) dominant, computing-intensive, Western model of global digital development; as well as the socio-technical imaginaries it enables for countries like Malaysia. This is achieved by pointing out the discursive parallels of the Silicon-Valley-centric model of digital development to traditional Western development cooperation. My analysis of policy documents, company statements, and government press releases shows that both create and normalise a specific, techno-optimistic version of development that ties progress to an integration of the target country into global capitalist value chains – all while glossing over contradictions and rendering alternative, decentralised notions of development unthinkable.

Against this analysis, DeepSeek can not only be read as a shock to the hegemony of the current Silicon-Valley centric model of global digital development; but also as an event opening alternative paths for countries like Malaysia to navigate, balance, and hedge their position in the global geopolitical order – and to imagine and enact alternative, decentralised, AI futures.