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:

Bächtold, S., Raghunath, P., & Lim, J. B. Y. (forthcoming 2024). Governing Technologies: Exploring Datafied Practices, Imaginaries and Digital State Assemblages in South and South East Asia. Journal of Digital Media & Policy, 15(3).

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2018). Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data’s Relation to the Contemporary Subject. Television & New Media, 20(4), 336-349.

Leong, S., & Lee, T. (2021). Global internet governance: Influences from Malaysia and Singapore. Palgrave MacMillan.

Lim, J. B. Y (forthcoming 2024). Digital Media Interventions in Southeast Asia: A Decolonial Perspective. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lim, J. B. Y. (2017). Engendering Civil Resistance: Social Media and Mob Tactics in Malaysia. International Journal of Cultural Studies, 20(2), 209-227.

Rasidi, P. P. (2023). Ludic cybermilitias: shadow play and computational propaganda in the Indonesian predatory state. Communication, Culture & Critique, 16(4), 235-242.

Zuboff, S. (2015). Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization.

Journal of Information Technology, 30(1), 75-89.

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.

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

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)

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)

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

Niki Cheong (King's College London)

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)

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

Khetrimayum Monish Singh (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)

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

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)

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)

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

Dewa Ayu Diah Angendari (Leiden University)

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

Stefan Bächtold (Monash University, Malaysia Campus)