1 Introduction

In Southeast Asia, separating contemporary politics from social media usage is unimaginable. The surfacing of mass rallies, whether located in the Independent Square of Kuala Lumpur, the National Monument of Jakarta, the Freedom Park in Phnom Penh, or other symbolic public spaces across the region, largely incorporates Facebook, Twitter (X), TikTok, and other social media platforms. Civil society organizations strategically curate attention-grabbing hashtags to gain public support, while hate groups exploit these platforms with hate speech and disinformation. Country leaders, including Prime Ministers Hun Manet of Cambodia and Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, maintain social media accounts. Politicians and parties heavily depend on these platforms as primary campaign tools. While conventional campaigning methods like television advertisements, rallies, and banners persist, their efficacy is augmented by the proliferation of supporters' posts, comments, photos, and videos disseminated through social media channels.

The multifaceted utilization of social media has become indispensable to political communication, engagement, and information dissemination in Southeast Asia, shaping the dynamics of public discourse and political participation. As the region undergoes profound sociopolitical transformations, the pervasive influence of digital platforms emerges as a dynamic and manifold phenomenon, profoundly affecting the political fabric of diverse nations within this vibrant corner of the world. The intersection of social media and politics in Southeast Asia is paramount, necessitating an in-depth exploration of how digital technologies intricately shape political landscapes and vice versa.

Since its inception in 1994, the term "social media" has undergone various definitions. Over the years, the consistent theme in defining social media has been its role as "an enabler for human interaction as well as an avenue to connect with other users" (Aichner et al., 2021: 219). The significance of "user-generated content," absent in its early definitions, has emerged as a central element in recent conceptualizations (p. 220). For this Element, I adopt Carr and Hayes' (2015: 50) definition, characterizing social media as "[i]nternet-based channels that allow users to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others."

Across various academic fields, the importance of the interplay between politics and social media is widely recognized. However, a notable constraint within the existing body of literature is the considerable overemphasis on studies concentrated on these dynamics within the United States, with a similar trend in other major developed nations, such as the United Kingdom. Despite some efforts to investigate these dynamics in diverse geopolitical contexts, notably around

dramatic political events such as the Arab Spring, research outside Western settings remains less influential. The attempt to extrapolate insights from Western nations to varied local contexts is often impeded by significant idiosyncrasies within each region's distinct political and media systems. Consequently, understanding and findings unearthed from these contexts may have limited relevance and applicability elsewhere, including Southeast Asia.

Echoing Sinpeng and Tapsell (2020: 6), I concur that no other region undergoes the dual impact of fortune and misfortune from social media as distinctly as Southeast Asia. The region has witnessed the integration of social media platforms in significant democratic events, such as the extensive and prolonged pro-democracy youth protests in 2021 (see Section 4.4), alongside autocratic utilization of the platforms in orchestrated disinformation campaigns (see Section 5.3.2). As detailed in Section 2, Southeast Asia is one of the most socially active regions globally on various social media platforms. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is home to a wide array of political structures, cultural systems, depths of political engagement, and histories. This complex tapestry defies easy alignment with the historical timelines or categories typically employed in assessing political change within Western settings. The unique assemblages of forces at play underscore dramatically different political configurations among the nation-states of this region. It is, therefore, imperative to produce knowledge and critical insights that emerge from the empirical contexts of the region.

Over the past decade, there has been a surge of research exploring the intersection of social media and politics in Southeast Asia. This growth is particularly notable in individual case studies within specific countries. Scholars have delved into the influence of social media on diverse facets such as citizen participation, online activism, elections, state propaganda, and digital authoritarianism. The existing literature heavily focuses on Indonesia (Beta & Neyazi, 2022; Hui, 2020; Lim, 2013, 2017a; Leiliyanti & Irawati, 2020; Rakhmani & Saraswati, 2021; Saraswati, 2020; Seto, 2017; Tapsell, 2017), Malaysia (Cheong, 2020; Johns & Cheong, 2019, 2021; Lim, 2016, 2017b; Lim, 2017; Tye et al., 2018), and the Philippines (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022; Chua & Soriano, 2020; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Ong, Tapsell, & Curato, 2019). Comparative studies of the region frequently revolve around these nations (Ong & Tapsell, 2022; Schäfer, 2018; Tapsell, 2021; Weiss, 2014). In contrast, there is a comparatively limited body of research on Myanmar (Aung & Htut, 2019; Kyaw, 2020; Passeri, 2019; Rio, 2021; Ryan & Tran, 2022), Thailand (Chattharakul, 2019; Sinpeng, 2021a, 2021b; Sombatpoonsiri, 2018, 2022), Singapore (Pang, 2020; Zhang, 2016), and Vietnam (Luong, 2020; Vu, 2017), with even less attention given to Cambodia (Doyle, 2021; Vong & Sinpeng, 2020), Laos, Timor-Leste, and Brunei. Meanwhile, regional analyses remain

scarce (exceptions see Abbott, 2011; Bünte, 2020; Lim, 2019, 2023b; Sinpeng, 2020; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020).

In this Element, I aim to contribute to, enhance, and broaden the research within this field by exploring the dialectic relationship and assessing how this interplay played out in political communication, citizen engagement, grassroots activism, political campaigns, and elections. Building upon existing literature, which encompasses the works of Southeast Asian scholars mentioned earlier and beyond, my analysis is also rooted in my longitudinal research and observation of countries in the region.

Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, I ground my theoretical and analytical contributions on two primary sources. First, I draw on the empirical material from my unpublished research on recent grassroots progressive and regressive activism, political campaigns, and electoral politics (primarily from 2018 to 2023). Second, I incorporate analytical and empirical insights from my past work on social media and activism in the region (Lim, 2019, 2023b), including in-depth research on Indonesia and Malaysia (Lim, 2013, 2016, 2017a, 2017b), and algorithmic dynamics (Lim, 2020a, 2023a). Bringing these together, I offer a fresh analysis with a series of arguments that evolve from and intercede with the prevailing discourse. I specifically address three critical domains of literature that predominantly influence academic discussions on social media and politics: network society and democracy (Section 1.1), social media and public spheres (Section 1.2), and, more recently, polarization and disinformation (Section 1.3). Situating my empirical research in Southeast Asia, I position the region not only as a research site but also as a source of conceptual and theoretical interventions that may find relevance elsewhere, notably in the Global South.

The principal framework of my arguments is that the relationship between social media and politics is multifaceted and co-constituting, shaped by dynamic and ever-changing technological, sociopolitical, and user contextual arrangements. In this milieu, first, I argue that the rich-gets-richer tendency of social media *scale-free* networks (Section 1.1) contributes to inequality and consolidation of power. In Southeast Asia, this means that in parallel with the exponential growth of digital networks in the last two decades, the governments, as the region's most powerful entities, have also grown to become the strongest hubs within the networks with increased capacity to control and influence political trajectories. Second, I assert that social media embodies the *platform capitalism* model rather than fostering the democratic public sphere (Section 1.2). Political pursuits on social media are thus intertwined with *communicative capitalism* (Section 1.2), where *algorithmic marketing culture* (Section 1.3) takes precedence over civic discourse and engagement. However,

Southeast Asian cases of grassroots activism show that activists and citizens have the *agency* to shape the outcomes of their social media activities while continue negotiating their positions vis-à-vis algorithmic and marketing predispositions. Lastly, I argue that, in Southeast Asia, the ascent of *algorithmic politics* (Section 1.3), employed by political actors with undemocratic motives, is the principal factor in deepening polarization and escalating disinformation, furthering autocratizing trends.

1.1 Network Society versus Democracy

Scholarly works on the intersection of digital media and politics, from early studies of the static internet to more contemporary analyses of social media, revolve mainly around the idea that network society and democracy mutually reinforce each other. While works in this area are abundant, Manuel Castells stands out as the foremost authority, evident in his *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* trilogy (1996, 1997, 1998). In these volumes, Castells explores how the rise of information and communication technologies has led to significant societal shifts, emphasizing the crucial role of networks in shaping modern social, economic, and political structures. He argues that networks have replaced traditional hierarchies as the primary organizing principle in society. Castells contends that digital communication technologies enable these networks to reconfigure political power dynamics, potentially fostering democratization through increased citizen participation and the emergence of networked social movements. However, he acknowledges that access inequality may hinder democratization by creating political engagement and influence disparities.

I contend that access inequality aside, digital networks are not egalitarian networks where citizens have equal opportunities to participate in public discourse. First and foremost, the internet is never inherently egalitarian. Instead, the internet structure exhibits characteristics of a *scale-free* network, a network whose degree distribution follows a power law (Barabási & Albert, 1999). This structure arises from two mechanisms – growth and preferential attachment – where new nodes are inclined to link with existing highly connected nodes, which are more likely to eventually become hubs (Barabási & Bonabeau, 2003).

Matthew Hindman's research (2008, 2018) supports this preferential attachment thesis. Analyzing millions of web pages, Hindman (2008) discovered that elites exert significant control over the presentation and accessibility of political content online. In his subsequent study, Hindman (2018) challenges expectations of audience fragmentation and resistance to media monopolies, asserting that giants like Google and Facebook, along with super users, dominate social media

platforms. In this environment, it is mathematically impossible for smaller players to effectively compete with the elites, aligning with the *scale-free* theory.

Scale-free networks, including the internet and social media, evolve through growth and preferential attachment processes, resulting in a growing rich-get-richer phenomenon and an increasingly unequal distribution of connectivity. In social media networks, highly connected hubs hold disproportionate influence. Extreme inequality in these platforms stems from this structure, where a small number of hubs significantly impact overall network dynamics, posing challenges to democratization.

As of 2024, contemporary social media networks are more unequal than their earlier versions. In the intersection of social media and politics, these networks amplify the influence of larger political entities, reinforcing power dynamics. The ongoing growth of social media networks further enhances the dominance of powerful entities, contributing to the accumulation of power over time by those initially lacking control during the internet's early stages, such as Southeast Asian governments, including authoritarian regimes (see Section 2.3). In the region, the governments presently stand among the strongest nodes within social media's *scale-free* networks.

1.2 Social Media and Public Spheres

Another persistent focal point within the exploration of digital technologies and politics is the concept of the public sphere, drawing from the enduring Habermasian idea. Habermas (1989) envisions the public sphere as a discursive space where citizens engage in open, deliberative discourse, shaping public opinion and political decisions. The functioning public sphere comprises communicative spaces facilitating the exchange of information, ideas, and debates involving traditional mass media and contemporary digital platforms. Habermas (1989) identifies three forms of power within the public sphere – political, economic, and media power – each should adhere to the communicative rationality of presenting facts and arguments for critical scrutiny.

In examining modern democratic practices, Habermas highlights participation decline and growing disillusionment but remains optimistic about achieving a *real participatory democracy* under the *right conditions*. Despite the criticism of the notion of a rational deliberative public sphere, perceived as originating from a specific hegemonic perspective with "significant exclusions" (Fraser, 1990), the concept endures. Throughout history, from the telegraph to the internet and social media, there has been a search for media embodying these *right conditions*, prompting ongoing assessments of their potential to fulfill the requirements for a public sphere.

Early scholarly explorations of social media and the public sphere are numerous, and within this context, I draw attention to several prominent contributions. Benkler (2006) introduces the concept of a *networked public sphere*, suggesting that citizens in the networked information economy can transform their relationship with the public sphere by becoming creators and primary subjects, thus contributing to the democratization of the internet. Papacharissi (2009), recognizing both positive and negative technological effects, offers the term *virtual sphere 2.0* to describe activities such as sharing political opinions on blogs, engaging with content on YouTube, and participating in online discussion groups as manifestations of digital public spheres for citizen-consumers. Burgess and Green (2009) argue that YouTube serves as a *cultural public sphere,* facilitating encounters with cultural differences and fostering political *listening* across belief systems and identities.

Fuchs (2014) critiques these perspectives, advocating for a cultural materialist understanding of the concept grounded in political economy. He raises concerns about the ownership and commercialization of these platforms, asserting that corporate control may distort the democratic potential of the public sphere. Meanwhile, Dean (2009) disputes that the internet, rather than fostering a genuinely democratic public sphere, is integrated into the capitalist system, functioning as a tool for disseminating and promoting consumer culture. Using *communicative capitalism* to describe the fusion of communication technologies with capitalist logic, Dean argues that digital platforms can reinforce capitalist structures and influence the nature of public discourse in contemporary societies.

In recent scholarly discussions, alternative perspectives have emerged. One viewpoint argues that the promise of a digital public sphere has been hindered by autocratic challenges, with social media transitioning from an engine of protest to a potential mechanism for authoritarian resilience. It gained traction around 2016, fueled primarily by the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving the misuse of Facebook data to influence voters, notably aiding the US Trump election and the UK pro-Brexit campaign. Critics characterize this period as an era of *disinformation order* (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018) or *information disorders* (Schirch, 2021), an *epistemic crisis* (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018), and *post-truth politics* (Suiter, 2016). This view aligns with the prevailing perception that digital media has become autocratic, transforming social media from a diverse landscape of liberal freedoms to a troubling domain fraught with antidemocratic threats. While this narrative of technological pessimism captures certain crucial aspects, it paints a somewhat simplified narrative that portrays social media as a distinct realm with certain features that exacerbate real-world politics.

Another viewpoint acknowledges social media's role in facilitating authoritarianism while recognizing its potential contribution to the evolution of public

spheres. In contrast to the early utopian nternet scholars, proponents of this perspective do not perceive platforms as tools for democracy. Instead, scholars recognize the dual nature of technology, capable of aiding both democratization and autocratization (Schleffer & Miller, 2021; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020).

My perspective broadly aligns with the latter viewpoint. Drawing from my early research on the intersection of the internet and politics (Lim, 2002, 2005) to my most recent works on social media activism (Lim, 2017a, 2023a, 2023b), I acknowledge the potential for both democratic and undemocratic practices facilitated by digital platforms. Empirical cases from diverse Southeast Asian contexts reveal a historical pattern where social media platforms and their predecessors, such as the static internet, were utilized by both civil and uncivil society actors, including extremist and violent groups, pursuing progressive and regressive interests (Bräuchler, 2003; Lim, 2005; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Sinpeng, 2021b).

It is important to recognize that the dialectical relationship between technology and politics goes beyond a simplistic attribution to the mirroring of real politics or the conventional double-edged sword argument for technology. Here, I advocate for an examination of the inherent nature of the platforms themselves. Building upon Fuchs' (2014) and Dean's (2009) ideas, I assert that social media platforms were not inherently designed for political purposes. Their inception did not prioritize fostering reasoned communicative discourse and civic engagement. Instead, social media platforms fundamentally align with what Srnicek (2017) terms *platform capitalism*. This concept delineates a specific economic and organizational model where digital platforms serve as intermediaries, connecting various user groups – consumers, producers, and advertisers – within a digital ecosystem (Srnicek, 2017).

At the heart of *platform capitalism* lies the acquisition and monetization of user data. These platforms amass extensive information about user behaviors, preferences, and interactions, utilizing data for targeted advertising to generate revenue. Moreover, *platform capitalism* thrives on network effects, where a platform's value increases with more users, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. The ultimate goal of platform capitalists is to continually increase dominance in various markets, making global connectivity an imperative objective. To maximize its performance, automation and algorithmic decision-making have thus been integrated into *platform capitalism*, influencing content recommendation, user targeting, and overall platform functionality.

Social media are the epitome of the *platform capitalism* model. They function with a proclivity toward marketing culture, treating users more as consumers than citizens. I do not imply that social media are inherently detrimental to democracy or incapable of fostering citizen participation. Social media are neither simply a sociopolitical nor a marketing artifact, but both at the same

time. The commercialized marketing framework shapes users' activities but does not hold absolute power over them. Users are not simply passive subjects who have no agency; they, too, can extend and exercise their communicative agency on social media platforms as citizens. However, I underscore that any political activities on social media, including citizen and grassroots activism (see Section 4) as well as political campaigns and elections (see Section 5), are intertwined with *communicative capitalism*, wherein marketing logic takes precedence over the communicative discourse of the public spheres. Political dynamics on these platforms are shaped by attention, visibility, and information flow, aligning more with market dynamics than traditional democratic discourse (Lim, 2023a).

1.3 Social Media Algorithms, Polarization, and Disinformation

Amidst ongoing concerns about the autocratization of social media (see Section 1.1), there is a growing body of scholarship that explores three inter-related factors believed to impact democracy negatively: social media, political polarization, and the widespread dissemination of disinformation. Here, disinformation refers to information that can create misconceptions about the actual state of the world. Central to these concerns is the widespread hypothesis that social media platforms generate *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011), segregating users into ideological *echo chambers* (Sunstein, 2018). Some scholars emphasize the role of social media's *echo chambers* and *filter bubbles* in fostering hate speech, amplifying disinformation, deepening polarization, and enabling the rise of extreme populist communities (Govil & Baishya, 2018; Spohr, 2017; Sunstein, 2018).

In response, while recognizing the role of the platforms, some scholars believe that the perceived impact of *filter bubbles* and *echo chambers* may be overstated and contend that user information-seeking behaviors should be considered (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). Observably, social media users in Southeast Asia, notably in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines typically have an extensive and diverse network and are not clustered ideologically. Polarization in these places is primarily affective, not ideological.

My previous research, focusing on the interplay between algorithms, information exchanges, and social media users, demonstrated that the effect of social media interactions on users hinges on the convergence of complex forces (Lim, 2020a). In essence, the surge of disinformation and the deepening division and polarization are not causally linked to social media but are correlated. This correlation goes beyond algorithms creating isolated bubbles. Instead, as discussed in the following texts, the impact is primarily rooted in biases within three factors: *algorithmic marketing culture*, emphasizing the need for social

media algorithms to support targeted advertising; the restriction of political choices through binary politics, leading to the formation of *algorithmic enclaves* (Lim, 2020a); and the escalation of *algorithmic politics* (Lim, 2023b), characterized by the professionalization of social media campaigns and the manipulation of public discourse.

Over the past decade, social media platforms have shifted from a landscape without automated content-filtering algorithms to an increasingly algorithmic environment. In this new *algorithmic culture*, ways in cultural practices and experiences are increasingly shaped by algorithms (Striphas, 2015: 395). According to Striphas (2015: 406), rather than relying on the authority of culture, algorithmic culture depends on *crowd wisdom* as the source of recommendation practices. Here, algorithmic practices and operations help the crowd by determining the "most," such as the "trending topics," "the most relevant," or the "most liked."

Contrary to the notion of serving users or achieving *crowd wisdom*, I interject that the fundamental design principle of social media algorithms primarily revolves around revenue generation through targeted advertising. Such a principle aligns with the inherent *platform capitalism* model of social media platforms, adhering to the principles of marketing culture.

Hence, I introduce the term *algorithmic marketing culture* as a conceptual framework to elucidate the interdependent interplay between algorithmic operations and marketing principles that authoritatively shape the circulation, visibility, and popularity of content among social media users. At its core is branding, which encompasses a product's symbolic value and psychological representation, where attaining virality is the ultimate marketing goal (Holt, 2016). Here, algorithms make no distinction between content produced and circulated by commercial brands and ordinary users. The visibility, popularity, and virality of user-generated content, including political content, depend not on its inherent quality but rather on its performance as a brand (Lim, 2023a). In marketing, a brand's success relies heavily on the potency of affect. Affect is the prevailing currency in the social media communication network (Lim, 2020a). The dynamics of viral communication hinge on users being adequately stirred to share and reshare content, with research indicating a preference for content eliciting high-arousal emotions like joy, excitement, anxiety, and anger (Milkman & Berger, 2012). Essentially, the bias of the *algorithmic marketing culture* leans toward content that appeals to extreme affect.

While *algorithmic marketing culture* contributes to polarization in the social media landscape, it is not the sole factor. Algorithmic recommendation and ranking systems shape online communities but do not dictate users' choices (Lim, 2020a). I argue that users are not helplessly caught in *echo chambers* and victimized by the limited exposure. Instead, users have agency. Thus, the

emergence of polarized communities on social media cannot be solely attributed to algorithms; human users and the sociopolitical contexts surrounding them also play significant roles in shaping this phenomenon.

To capture the dynamic interplay between algorithms and social media users, I introduced *algorithmic enclaves*, namely: "discursive arenas where individuals, shaped by constant interactions with algorithms, engage with each other and unite based on a perceived shared identity online to defend their beliefs and safeguard their resources, often against a common enemy" (Lim, 2020a: 194). Members voluntarily shape these enclaves through their agency, coalesce around their hashtags, performing their exclusive hashtag politics.[1] These enclaves maintain a perpetual self-reinforcing loop, aiming to sustain current users and attract potential future users through repetitive processes. Given their ability to reinforce one another across platforms – the same user can trigger an algorithmic response on Instagram based on their post on Facebook post – these enclaves can become hubs for disseminating problematic message content. In other words, the algorithmic network can amplify and propagate disinformation (Lim, 2020a).

Beyond what transpires techno-socially on social media, in the last decade, we also witnessed the incorporation of *algorithmic politics*, namely, politics that revolves around the algorithmic manipulation of issues, primarily aimed at dominating media spheres to influence public opinion (Lim, 2023b: 39). *Algorithmic politics* encompasses a range of political maneuvers that leverage existing algorithmic biases to influence the public. In Southeast Asia, it becomes prominent when political actors exploit algorithms to sway citizens' decisions during elections and everyday political matters. Hence, I contend that the utilization of *algorithmic politics* by political actors plays an essential role in undermining democracy and contributing to the autocratization trend in the region.

1.4 Structure of This Element

This Element is organized as follows:

> Section 1 situates my contribution within existing debates and literature, presenting the analytical framework rooted in three key domains: network society and democracy, social media, and public spheres, and recent concerns about polarization and disinformation.

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[1] Hashtag politics refers to the use of hashtags on social media platforms as a strategic tool for political communication, activism, or engagement. It involves creating and popularizing specific hashtags to promote, discuss, organize, and/or mobilize around shared political issues/topics, events, or campaigns on social media platforms.