1 Southeast Asia's Contested Media Space

Any study of media systems will inevitably be coloured by the perceptions and preoccupations of the time. Media do not stand apart from politics, economics, culture, and society. As these change, so too do our expectations and estimations of media. If we were writing in the 1970s, we would probably be focusing on the media's role in the grand enterprises of nation-building and economic development that then defined the zeitgeist of postcolonial Asia. We would be assessing how the region's newspapers and broadcasters were faring against the economic and cultural imperialism of Western powers, and probably using the concept of 'development journalism' to analyse the media's contribution to largely state-driven socio-economic progress. If, on the other hand, this were the 1990s, the inescapable backdrop would be the democratic wave sweeping the globe following the end of the Cold War. Intellectual fashion would have dictated that we relate our study to the notion of 'Asian democracy', which government leaders declared – and many academic and policy analysts seemed to agree – represented an alternative to the ascendant liberal democratic model.

Instead, we are writing this in the late 2010s. The old issues have not disappeared, but are much less salient. The present reality is characterised by a curious blend of strong states and vibrant and penetrating markets; by media that are in structural transition, as journalistic organisations struggle to stay afloat even as audiences swim in increasingly vast digital media options. Democracy is on the defensive, with even the Western powers that once gallantly tried to export it to Southeast Asia now suffering what has been called a democratic recession or deconsolidation (Diamond, 2015; Foa & Mounk, 2017). The economic order, shaped for at least two decades by neoliberal market fetishism, lumbers on despite its patent inability to deliver social justice and environmental sustainability (Jomo, 2016; Mishra, 2017). Our perspective is influenced by these uncertain times.

No doubt, Southeast Asia has undergone profoundly positive changes in the space of a generation. Around eight out of every ten of its adults now get to pick their leaders in more-or-less competitive elections. In every country, media choice has proliferated thanks to television and the Internet. It has become harder for despots to hide wrongdoing or quash dissent. More than ever before, today's Southeast Asians expect the powerful to be accountable, and the weak to have a voice. But these raised expectations also demand that we examine critically media trends in the region. The media's democratic potential remains unfulfilled. This is not only because of direct coercion by governments – the traditional object of analysis when studying media and power. The core argument

running through the following sections is that the development of free, independent, and plural media has been complicated by trends towards commercialisation, digital platforms, and identity-based politics. These have interacted with state power in complex ways, opening up political space and pluralising discourse, but without necessarily resulting in structural change.

We flesh out our argument using Southeast Asian case studies. Section 2 looks at media in democratic transitions, with a focus on Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia. Section 3 examines Singapore as an important case of authoritarian resilience. Section 4 surveys the political economy of media in the region's non-communist societies, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand. Section 5 turns to the topic of intolerance and hate speech in Myanmar and Indonesia. Section 6 studies the Internet's impact on Vietnam and Malaysia and offers concluding thoughts.

We apply and extend insights from media studies to our chosen cases, which we describe in some detail for the sake of readers who are unfamiliar with these societies. We thus hope to provide a conceptually as well as contextually rich account of media and power in the region. That having been said, we do not try to provide a comprehensive survey of Southeast Asia's eleven nation-states and their media. We have selected countries that illustrate our chosen themes best – and that we know better. We focus on journalism, including so-called citizen reporting and blogs, and other informational and political media such as books and documentary films where relevant. We do not deal with popular media, which we acknowledge have an underappreciated impact on political culture and values.

We should declare here our position as writers. While our study is evidence-based and guided by disciplinary concerns, neither of us can be described as detached or disinterested scholars. We are ourselves citizens of Southeast Asian – of Singapore and Malaysia – and have spent most of our adult lives advocating for more democracy and media freedom in our own countries and beyond. We view media as a powerful set of institutions and practices that have emancipatory and civilising potential but tend to be captured and corrupted by powerful interests for their own ends – often in ways that are not immediately obvious, but that critical scholarship can help reveal.

This normative thrust is aligned with international human rights principles, as articulated by Frank La Rue, who took a special interest in Southeast Asia during his tenure as the United Nations' special rapporteur on freedom of expression (2008–14). Journalism, he noted in one of his annual reports to the UN, 'must be seen as an activity and profession that constitutes a necessary service for any society, as it provides individuals and society as a whole with the necessary information to allow them to develop their own thoughts and to freely

draw their own conclusions and opinions'; this is a right that enables people to 'make informed decisions and express their opinions freely and participate actively in a democratic system' (UN Human Rights Council, 2012: 3).

Our approach is also informed by the multidimensional conceptualisation of media development adopted by UNESCO – the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization – in 1991. For media to fulfill their social role, it is not enough that they be free from illegitimate restrictions by the state. They must also be sufficiently independent from political and commercial pressures to allow them to exercise professional standards and ethical decision-making. There also must be a plurality of media to ensure that diverse perspectives and interests are represented in the national conversation. More recently, the safety of journalists and other communicators has been recognised as yet another distinctive component of freedom of expression as it pertains to media. Thus, media freedom, independence, pluralism, and safety are the key benchmarks that we apply in this study (UNESCO, 2018a).

1.1 Media Freedom, Independence, Pluralism, and Safety

Southeast Asia is one of the most politically diverse regions in the world. In 2019, its eleven nations included two of the world's five remaining communist regimes (Laos and Vietnam); one of the handful of absolute monarchies (Brunei); two democracies with vibrant and competitive polities (Indonesia and the Philippines); two others stifled by the military (Myanmar and Thailand); one rated free but fragile (Timor-Leste); another, once free but now broken (Cambodia); and two of the world's longest-lasting electoral authoritarian regimes – one recently ousted (Malaysia) and the other still going strong (Singapore).

As for press freedom, Southeast Asia's media systems are global underperformers. None is rated as 'free' according to Freedom House, which conducts the most comprehensive annual assessments of this kind. None has a press freedom score that places it in the world's top one-third. Other than Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Indonesia, all are in the bottom 25 per cent (Freedom House, 2017). Press freedom indices are crude measures that may conceal significant details. For example, although Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia were rated within three points of one another on Freedom House's 100-point scale, they are unfree in markedly different ways. Wealthy Singapore's regime is the most hegemonic of the three but also the safest for journalists. Upper-middle-income Malaysia has the strongest civil society movement for media freedom. Lower-middle-income Cambodia's media system is the most corrupt and the most exposed to arbitrary coercion. Such differences matter for social

scientific prediction as well as for advocacy and activism. They point to different regime strengths and vulnerabilities, and different opportunities and threats for agents of democratic change.

All Southeast Asian countries have laws that are incompatible with the right to freedom of expression. These include discretionary newspaper licensing laws, which allow governments to suspend or terminate a publication at will – or, for that matter, to never let it start. Singapore uses this power to protect the monopoly of its pro-government publishing behemoth, Singapore Press Holdings. The Malaysian government suspended the financial newspapers of The Edge group for three months in 2015 to block its reporting of the massive corruption scandal concerning the state investment fund, 1MDB. (The suspension was set aside by the High Court after two months.) Defamation laws are also problematic. Defamation is universally regarded as a legitimate limitation on free speech – if treated as a civil matter. But criminal defamation is on the books in several countries and has been actively used in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand. States also restrict media freedom with sweeping and vaguely worded laws policing national security and insult. These include blasphemy law in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar, and lèse majesté in Thailand.

While media *freedom* from government control is constrained by a range of repressive laws, the main threats to media *independence* arise from news organisations' ownership structures and commercial orientations. All media owners need to keep an eye on the financial bottom line, but they vary in their commitment to protect journalism's public service mission from market pressures. Most news organisations have cut manpower budgets and required editorial decision-making to become more advertiser-friendly. As a result, media have become more consumer-oriented, emphasising lifestyle and entertainment at the expense of news and information required for the country's civic health. Furthermore, many owners treat their media outlets as vehicles to promote their own business and political interests. This tendency is particularly serious in Indonesia, where some major media outlets are turned into barely camouflaged campaign vehicles during election season.

Commercial pressures are a universal problem that cannot be eliminated; but they can be mitigated by a strong professional ethos at the organisational and national levels, cultivated by educational and training institutions, journalism associations, independent press councils, media monitoring civic groups, and other accountability mechanisms. Such organizations can help push back against commercial forces. Unfortunately, the foundations for professionalism in Southeast Asian media are generally undeveloped. They are probably strongest in the Philippines and Indonesia, but even there, their influence is limited to a few higher-quality media outlets.

Media *pluralism* has increased over the decades, spurred by economic and technological progress. More and more Southeast Asians have joined the ranks of the consuming classes that media companies and advertisers want to reach, resulting in the mushrooming of media serving different demographic segments, geographic regions, and cultural niches. For example, Malaysia's successful *Sinar Harian* chain of newspapers, launched in 2006, provides local coverage complementing the national dailies. Radio, with its lower financial barrier to entry as well as its accessibility to rural audiences, contributes significantly to media pluralism. Thailand in particular has a lively community radio sector, comprising several thousand small stations of varying quality. Cambodia was also notable for its many independent radio stations – thirty-two of which were apparently so effective in circulating alternative viewpoints that they were shut down in a pre-election sweep by the government in 2018.

The most hospitable medium for plural voices is the Internet, at least for people who are digitally connected. Several mainstream outlets in the region, such as the Philippines' ABS-CBN network, have harnessed the new opportunities of multimedia storytelling and citizen reporting, thus raising the quality and quantity of previously neglected grassroots perspectives. Being less capital-intensive and more loosely regulated than print and broadcast media, the Internet has also enabled new players to challenge mainstream media organisations and the state's hegemony over media. Around half of Southeast Asia's population count as internet users, with penetration rates ranging from around one-third in East Timor, Laos, and Myanmar; half in Indonesia; two-thirds in the Philippines and Vietnam; and four-fifths in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (Kemp, 2018). Such data are difficult to interpret. Not all internet use has any relevance to public affairs or political discourse, so high penetration may not translate into more plural politics; conversely, though, penetration rates may underestimate the Internet's impact in periods of heightened interest in politics, such as during elections, when online content tends to be eagerly shared by word of mouth or hardcopy printouts (George, 2006).

One way to think about pluralism is in terms of the access that diverse communities have to media, both as producers and as consumers. It is in this respect that media pluralism in Southeast Asia has grown. But another measure of pluralism is the range of relevant voices heard by the general public on matters of common concern. In this regard, media pluralism in the region is lacking. In many countries, alternative viewpoints are pushed to the fringe. Even if they are not completely silenced, they are excluded from engaging in mainstream debates. Political polarisation means that media consumption occurs in silos, with little dialogue across ideological or cultural boundaries.

Public service broadcasting – mandated to facilitate such dialogue in Western Europe, Canada, and Australia – is weak in Southeast Asia.

As for media *safety*, the 2009 Maguindanao massacre in the Philippines remains the single deadliest attack on journalists in world history. Thirty-two media workers were among the fifty-eight individuals slaughtered in this election-related killing spree. The immediate shock at the murder has been replaced by lingering outrage at the perpetrators' impunity. A local political clan, aided by police and militiamen, has been accused of the murder, but as the tenth anniversary of the event approached, there were still no convictions. In the decade from 2007, a total of eighty journalists were killed in the line of duty in Southeast Asia, mostly in the Philippines, but also in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (UNESCO, 2018b). Body counts underestimate the safety problem. Intimidation, including harassment of female journalists, can constrain the media even if it does not materialise in physical violence. Incitement to hatred against journalists is part of the authoritarian populist toolkit used by leaders such as Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines.

1.2 Media Organisations

Similar to those of other regions, Southeast Asia's news media come in diverse organisational forms and formats. The digital revolution has encouraged convergence, such that newspapers now also produce video, while television news channels also publish text, for example. It has also been highly disruptive, with several traditional news media platforms losing attention, influence, and profits. In Singapore's relatively mature media market, total print newspaper circulation shrank by 15 per cent between 2012 and 2016. At the same time, it grew by more than 25 per cent in Indonesia (Campbell, 2017). On the whole, legacy media organisations are stronger than digital-born outlets in terms of their capacity for news gathering and their branding and marketing muscle. Therefore, in each country, the biggest online news and information players tend to include the digital operations of established newspapers, such as *Kompas* in Indonesia, *The Star* in Malaysia, *The Straits Times* in Singapore, and the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

Television news markets are highly competitive in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Myanmar opened up the domestic TV news market to private companies in 2018. In most of the region, though, states have been reluctant to loosen their hold on broadcast news. In Malaysia, the government broadcaster conceded its monopoly in the 1980s – but to a station owned by the ruling party. In Cambodia, similarly, competition among TV channels does not amount to meaningful pluralism since the main ones are all run by government members or

businessmen linked to the ruling party. In communist Laos and Vietnam, and in the absolute monarchy of Brunei, the national broadcaster monopolises domestic services, functioning as an undisguised mouthpiece of the people in power. Singapore's MediaCorp (which includes its external service, Channel NewsAsia) is also a monopoly provider of national TV news. Although structured like a commercial entity and manifesting strong production values, it takes instructions from government officials.

There is no strong tradition of independent public service broadcasting in Asia. Indonesia's state networks, TVRI and RRI, were promised a makeover into independent public service media, but this has been delayed by political bickering. As a result, Indonesian TV is highly polarised, with stations aligned with the economic and political interests of their owners. The Thai Public Broadcasting Service, set up in 2008, was mandated to serve the public interest without political interference, but politicians unhappy with its coverage have repeatedly threatened its funding. The Philippines, perhaps because of its American-influenced political system, did not create a state-funded broadcaster. In the former British colonies of Malaysia and Singapore, governments did not follow the BBC example but instead claimed they needed direct control of the airwaves to further their urgent economic development and nation-building missions.

Though relatively small, independent online media contribute disproportionately to the region's media pluralism. They tend to provide more critical coverage of public affairs than do mainstream media. Several were launched with the aid of external funding from international media development foundations. The region's most successful independent online media projects include Malaysia's *Malaysiakini* and the Philippines' *Rappler.* Another traditional way media have sought autonomy is to remain outside the national territory of the state. Exile media such as the Democratic Voice of Burma were important sources of news during Myanmar's junta period. Vietnam's large diaspora communities are also significant producers of media. The *Sarawak Report* investigative blog, authored by a Borneo-born journalist based in Britain, was at the forefront of exposing Malaysia's 1MDB scandal.

Compared with media markets in Europe and the Americas, Southeast Asia's are more linguistically divided. English-language titles are the main national newspapers in the Philippines and Singapore, but even in these countries local languages are preferred by television news viewers. In Indonesia and Thailand, English-language newspapers are read mainly by educated urban elites and expatriates. In Malaysia, the widest-circulating newspaper is in neither the national language of Malay nor the urban working language of English but in Chinese, serving the country's largest ethnic minority community. Linguistic

divides are usually associated with other important distinctions. Producers working in different languages are often informed by different professional norms and traditions, while their respective audiences may differ in their racial and religious loyalties, social class, and educational levels.

1.3 Norms and Values

Understanding Southeast Asian media requires some conceptual decluttering. The media of the Global South have rarely been studied on their own terms; they are often implicitly viewed in a Eurocentric frame, with Western democratic systems being used as the default yardstick. The resulting essentialised accounts tend to extrapolate from stereotypes of Asian culture or political systems. These habits have infected the widely used concepts 'development journalism' and 'Asian values'.

Development journalism was first articulated in the Philippines in the 1960s as a professional reform movement that called on media in the Global South to resist sensationalism and respond constructively to their countries' pressing socio-economic needs (Romano, 2009). Some governments latched onto the concept to make the case that the press should be their willing partners in nation-building and economic development, thus justifying their authoritarian controls. This was also the case with 'Asian values', a debate that peaked in the 1990s, when the West's democracy-promotion industry was in overdrive following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states (George, 2019). The slogan had rhetorical utility among Southeast Asian states, particularly Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which were resisting Western-style liberal democracy and press freedom. They argued that their own civilisational values – social harmony, order, communitarianism, and respect for authority – were national strengths, as demonstrated by their high levels of economic growth.

Many journalists and scholars adopted the concept, even though its flaws were fairly obvious. Asian values, as set out by its self-styled spokesmen, actually described Confucian societies at most, and even then only superficially – since even China had a long tradition of dissent and revolt. Government leaders stopped using the slogan after the late 1990s, when the Asian Financial Crisis made the old rhetoric ring hollow. Furthermore, democratic transitions in Indonesia, South Korea, and Taiwan debunked the theory that Asians had no cultural appetite for freedom. Pro-democracy protest movements in Malaysia and Myanmar took longer to bear fruit but made the same point.

Many of the earlier claims made about Asian media were based on what Asian leaders said about them. It was simplistically assumed that in authoritarian settings, media workers had no agency – perhaps even no minds of their

own – and that the media uncritically internalised official positions or national cultures. Fortunately, more recent studies have taken the trouble to ask journalists themselves about their values and norms, either through detailed surveys or ethnographic research. The multi-country *Worlds of Journalism* study, for example, reveal that each country has not one but several co-existing professional subcultures. In Indonesia, the Southeast Asian country included in the study, around half of the journalists surveyed identified with the 'opportunist facilitator' role, which sees media as partners of power. But almost four in ten Indonesian journalists saw themselves as having an interventionist, adversarial role as 'critical change agents', compared with only two in ten American journalists. Barely one in ten Indonesians identified themselves as 'detached watchdogs', compared with almost two-thirds of American journalists (Hanitzsch, 2011). Recent multi-country analyses of news content (Mellado et al., 2017) make it even clearer that national or regional media systems are not homogeneous. They are hybrid. Differences within nations – between tabloid-style television news and establishment newspapers, for example – are as important as differences between them.

Qualitative researchers, meanwhile, have helped to correct old stereotypes through their deep dives into the journalistic practices of various Southeast Asian countries. For example, although many governments of Muslim countries are infamously intolerant of press freedom, Steele (2018) has shown that many Muslim journalists in the region who believe in independent, public service journalism view themselves as applying values drawn from their religious teachings. In-depth ethnographic and survey research has tended to cut through the 'container thinking' that treats national territories as the default unit for comparison and categorisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2012).

Any research into Asian media norms must also confront the reality of corruption within the profession. So-called 'envelope' journalism is widespread: due to low salaries, reporters, when they attend media events, expect to be handed packets of cash from newsmakers. In several countries, some investigative reporters are motivated by the opportunity for blackmail: they demand hush money from politicians and businessmen once wrongdoing is detected. Higher ethical standards tend to be promoted by a handful of more principled media organisations, professional associations, and press councils.

1.4 Parsing the Media-and-Democracy Question

The following sections present case studies of democratic transitions and non-transitions, of media commercialisation, identity politics, and internet disruption. They advance our larger argument that developing democratic media

requires much more than addressing direct government censorship and coercion. We are circumspect about making any grander claims than that, partly because the sheer diversity of contexts in Southeast Asia defies generalisation.

Besides, the media-and-democracy question is ambiguous and does not lend itself to a single, simple answer. Democratisation could refer to regime change or to changes in the style of governance, improved public access to information and ideas, wider and deeper citizen participation, or a transformation in political culture. Rarely do these all occur at once, but in every Southeast Asian country there has been movement along some of these dimensions while others remain stubbornly resistant to progress.

Our analysis is open to all these ways of thinking about media and power but leans toward the idea of participation. This is in line with the theoretical framework adopted by Hansson and Weiss (2018) in their study of political participation in Asia. They deploy the concept of 'political space' to refer to something broader than state arenas or formal institutions. It is 'a multidimensional arena for empowerment at the level of ideas as well as policies or other instrumental objectives, and working with, against, or around fellow citizens as well as the state' (p. 6). It allows for 'a wider conception of political participation, beyond procedural and formal definitions centred around transfer of political authority from citizens to officials through elections, and as exercised by both formal and informal actors' (p. 8). They conceptualise political space as a realm of struggle, where different and unequal groups – including members of political, economic, and civil society, and with pro-democratic and anti-democratic tendencies – try to expand or constrict boundaries and modes of engagement to suit their interests. We explore the media's role in these struggles, starting in the next section with the dramatic political changes that have occurred in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia.

2 Media and Democratic Transitions

On 9 May 2018, Malaysians voted out the Barisan Nasional (BN), which had governed the country since independence in 1957, and elected a four-party coalition led by a former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. With this dramatic change came a chance for reforms in media and free expression. The new Pakatan Harapan government had made campaign promises to repeal repressive laws and create a freer environment for media. The election result was greeted with scenes of jubilation at independent news outlet *Malaysiakini*. 'We think *Malaysiakini* can do better in a business environment that is friendlier to independent media,' said its editor-in-chief Steven Gan (interview, 1 June 2018). 'At the same time, we face more competition with more players