

## **Mediating Asia: Information, Democracy, and the State In and Before the Digital Age**

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What are the political, economic, and cultural implications of an increasingly robust and globally penetrating Asia-based media industry? How have Asian states tried to manage the diffuse representations of Asia emerging from informal yet globalized media channels? This collection of articles by Asian media scholars and professional journalists explores the changing relationships between Asian states and Asia-based media institutions and industries as the nature and role of media in Asian society undergoes profound change. With the increasing visibility and power of Indian film, Korean television, and Japanese animation industries, and of Asian broadcasting networks such as Star TV and Al Jazeera, there has been no shortage of scholarly attention devoted to the rise of Asian media. This collection, however, focuses less on the meteoric rise and power of Asian media itself and more on how that rise has been negotiated by Asian states, with a particular focus on China and Indonesia. As digital media technologies become ubiquitous, both formal and informal media platforms push beyond state boundaries, challenging state efforts to control the content of and access to information and entertainment. This challenge is addressed in commentaries by three journalists with extensive Asian experience, and three academics exploring the spatial and historical contexts of an increasingly mediated Asia.

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Over the long course of Asia's interaction with the rest of the world, Asia's story has largely been told by non-Asians. The very idea of mediating Asia is, it could be argued, a colonial construct, one that emerged at a time when Asia was viewed as sufficiently inscrutable as to require the interpretation of experts. And the idea of Asia itself, as a coherent spatial whole defined by certain social, cultural, or political continuities, is in many ways a construction of non-Asian colonial expertise (Lewis & Wigen, 1997; Oakes, 2009; Said, 1979). Asia is, in this sense, the original outcome of the West's mediating monopoly. This collection of articles began with a simple question: What happens when that monopoly is broken? What happens to the ways the Asian story gets told—and to the very idea of Asia—when that story is mediated from within Asia, by Asian-based media institutions from Asian-oriented media platforms? In a sense, then, the Mediating Asia Symposium at the University of Colorado, where the articles in this collection were originally delivered, was envisioned as a postcolonial project for revamping Asian area studies.

Yet even as the symposium's organizers at the Colorado Center for Asian Studies began thinking about this broad question, it became apparent to us that the issue was less one about how Asia might be reconfigured or deconstructed and more about how the rapidly changing landscape of media technology, the rise of social media, the globalizing penetration of an increasingly dizzying array of informal and formal media platforms, and the blending of official state and commercial media interests were altering fundamentally the role of media in Asian societies and how those societies communicate with other parts of the world. The question was no longer about Asia as a meaningful object of inquiry, and instead we focused our attention on, first, how people in Asia are negotiating their relationships with media; second, how those relationships cross multiple boundaries of territory, identity, and status; and third, how Asian states seek to manage those relationships in an environment where media have become increasingly diffuse and individualized, privatized, and porous with respect to borders and regulations.

The collection of articles that has emerged here tends to focus on the last of these three broad topics. It is important to recognize at the outset that we have foregone any attempt to cover the vast range of ways that Asian societies are now mediated. Nor can we in any way claim to represent balanced coverage of the vast diversity that exists across the Asian continent (e.g., South Asia is, regrettably, absent here). Instead, we have focused on how Asian states seek to wrest control of their messaging from the non-Asian world, which has seldom questioned its entitlement to exclusively tell Asia's story to non-Asians. Although most of the articles in the collection provide general accounts of how digital media technologies and social media have altered state-society relations within and beyond Asia, their topical focus lies with journalism and broadcast media. Readers will thus find less emphasis on the individual and the scale of everyday life in these accounts. Instead, the collection provides a sharply critical focus on questions of press freedom, on democratization and the privatization of media, on the historical roots of journalism in Asia, and on soft power as a central motivation in the relationship between the state and media.

This introduction provides an overview of the collection and seeks to highlight these and other themes that the articles, as a whole, explore. Three commentaries by professional journalists with significant Asian reporting experience discuss various dimensions of state efforts both to promote a unified, coherent message of national identity to the world and to control how that message gets

conveyed by media agents beyond states' direct control. These are followed by three academic articles conveying broader historical and geographical perspectives on the tensions between state-mediating narratives of national identity and sovereignty on the one hand, and media's proclivities—driven by both commercial interests and enlightenment ideals—to always push beyond national borders on the other.

### The Collection

Endy Bayuni, editor-in-chief of *The Jakarta Post*, Indonesia's largest English-language newspaper, begins the collection with a journalist's account of the need for Indonesia to self-mediate. Puzzling over the lack of attention garnered by Indonesia from global media networks (in comparison especially with China and, to a lesser extent, India), Bayuni argues that Indonesia's challenge is not only to get its message out there into global media streams but also to become a self-mediator, to overcome the challenges of telling the Indonesian story both to Indonesians and to the world. "The near absence of Indonesians' involvement" in global media, he writes, "means these stories often fail to capture the biases and the aspirations of the [Indonesian] people" (this Special Section). Bayuni also offers an account of Indonesia's democratization and its implications for press freedom and journalistic integrity and professionalism. Noting, for instance, that press freedoms in Indonesia have been accompanied by an increasingly partisan media, Bayuni's account suggests that democracy there has actually had a polarizing effect on mainstream print and broadcast media. This will probably not surprise American readers, who have recently been faced with polarized media of their own. But unlike in the United States, where the Internet's ability to create individualized media feeds and echo chambers of like-minded political perspectives is often blamed for media polarization, Bayuni comments that in Indonesia, the Internet has actually had a neutralizing effect in providing an alternative platform for nonpartisan voices.

Former Al Jazeera China correspondent Melissa Chan provides an account of the events leading up to her 2012 expulsion from China. Chan's posting in China—during the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, the 2010 Shanghai Expo, and the rise of Xi Jinping's increasingly restrictive administration—coincided with a time of intensifying state efforts to wrest control of as much media coverage of China as possible. Chan's expulsion, in apparent response to her refusal to soften her reporting's critical edge, reveals the Chinese state's determination to put foreign journalists on notice if they cannot abide by the same unwritten rules of self-censorship that govern the domestic press. Chan's story offers an additional interesting twist in that her ethnic Chinese heritage and her employment with an Asia-based media company contributed to an expectation among her Chinese hosts that her reporting would naturally be friendlier toward China and more willing to convey the message Beijing wanted told. That this expectation proved wrong likely contributed to the unprecedented speed with which the state turned against her. It is also revealing of the way the Chinese state still tries to marshal the loyalty of overseas Chinese in its mediating efforts (Sun, 2002), a strategy that has oftentimes backfired (Levin, 2016).

The theme of unintended consequences of state efforts to control the message is also the subject of Isabel Hilton's commentary on environmental journalism in China. Hilton, the editor of the London- and Beijing-based environmental nonprofit Chinadialogue, focuses on the dilemma faced by the Chinese state as it recognizes the need for media transparency and participation to help curb the country's environmental crisis while maintaining a need to closely control public information. More than other, more

politically sensitive issues, environmental degradation and pollution have been fertile areas for the growth of unofficial media narratives within China. Here, Hilton finds the promise of something akin to civil society emerging in the complicated relationship between the state and informal Chinese media. Yet while citizen media activism regarding environmental matters has grown within an expanding space of state tolerance, so too has the state's efforts to maintain security and social stability, along with its willingness to protect the privileges of China's major economic players.

Historian Timothy Weston's article traces the media dimensions of the U.S.–China relationship over the past century. Weston argues that the globalization of media complicates what has historically been a confrontational discourse between the United States and China over the role of the press in society. As Hilton does, he finds that the rise of an informally mediated China (one that is truly global in scale, particularly given the diffusion of overseas Chinese around the world) presents both opportunities and challenges for the Chinese state and its efforts to control the message. He also finds that the United States and China have long provided foils for each other as they define for themselves the proper role of media, the meaning of a free and independent press, and the state's tolerance for journalists as critics versus conveyors of national messaging. As discussed below, this last issue of state (in)tolerance for a dissenting media is something that, under the Trump administration, the United States now ironically shares with China to an unprecedented extent.

Communication scholar Rianne Subijanto adds to Weston's historical approach in her article on the revolutionary press in colonial Indonesia, raising questions about the role of the press in a society undergoing revolutionary transformation and, more fundamentally, about print media as a conveyor of enlightenment ideals that challenge a colonial state. Her article returns to the well-known theme of the role of print media in nation building (see, e.g., Anderson, 1983), but focuses more specifically on the early communist movement in colonial Indonesia to consider the role of vernacular media not so much in the now-familiar story of national consciousness-raising, but in the broader intellectual projects of enlightenment, social justice, and revolutionary struggle. Her article reminds us that mediating Asia has historically been not simply a project of state building but also has been about the media's role in Asia's uneasy negotiation with the enlightenment values that define our expectations of a free press and of an independent media's role in democracy. In this sense, her article offers an Indonesian rejoinder to Weston's history of U.S.–China media relations and a historical benchmark from which to read Bayuni's comments about media and democracy in Indonesia today.

Media studies scholar Michael Curtin wraps up the collection with an article that considers how Asian states have taken an increasingly entrepreneurial (and less regulatory) approach to promoting (rather than managing) Asian media. He focuses on the key tension between national and transnational media interests, a tension he characterizes in terms of commercial versus official media capital. Commercial media capital tends to emerge at the world's cultural crossroads, far from the centers of state power (e.g., Lagos, Mumbai, Los Angeles, Hong Kong). In many places, though (e.g., London, Dubai, Seoul, Beijing), commercial and official media capital intertwine (Curtin sees them as points on a continuum). Faced with the growing power and ubiquity of commercial media capital, he argues, Asian states have adjusted with creative appropriations of commercial media platforms and formats. Asian states "have thus retained their focus on the accumulation of political and social capital while adopting

strategies designed to manage external competitive pressures by refiguring professional practices and accommodating popular taste." This has resulted in "hybrid" media institutions that are "contradictory and impure, contingently positioned on a spectrum of commercial and official media capital" (this Special Section). Curtin's article thus reminds us that national and transnational media cannot be neatly separated in the Asian context.

### **Information, Democracy, and the State In and Before the Digital Age**

It is no revelation to claim that states seek to control their national narratives, or that this has become more challenging with the rise of digital technologies, along with the globalization and diffusion of media outlets and platforms. This collection of articles, however, comes at a time when the stakes seem particularly high as states within and beyond Asia have doubled down on their efforts to assert control over their narratives. All of the articles suggest in various ways the unintended outcomes of state efforts to both promote and control media. How does a colonial state promote civilizing values through print media while trying to silence a revolution that claims those same values? How does a state use media to promote environmental awareness while limiting its use for environmental activism? How do you use the Internet to get your message out there and control it at the same time? How do you promote creative media and control the message at the same time?

The collection comes at a time when prospects for global press freedom are getting worse, not better. This is perhaps ironic, given that the explosion of media formats and accessibility around the world would seem to have a neutralizing effect (to use Bayuni's term) on the state's efforts to install itself as the sole arbiter of information for and about the nation. Yet as media are globalized, controlling the message becomes even more important because that message is so diffuse. So states have ratcheted down. According to Freedom House (2016), 14% of world's population lived in free press areas in 2013, the lowest level since 2003. In 2015, the number was down to 13%. The only Asian states to make Freedom House's (2016) free-press list were Japan and Taiwan.

In 2017, to the already highly precarious position of independent journalism in states such as Russia, Turkey, China, and Egypt, we can now add the United States as the latest front to open up in what looks more and more like a global war on the free press as populist strains of xenophobic nationalism grow in power. U.S. President Donald Trump's attacks on independent journalism—in which he has called journalists "the enemy of the American people" and has limited access to government briefings to friendly media outlets—echo an already well-established line of attack coming from Xi Jinping's administration in China (Phillips, 2017). As both Chan's and Weston's articles make clear, the Chinese state has excelled at discrediting Western media as systematically and deliberately biased against China (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2016). In 2016, Xi demanded "absolute loyalty" from the press, telling Chinese news outlets their "surname should be Party" ("Xi Jinping asks," 2016). In a climate in which Americans have begun openly reflecting on rising self-censorship in the mainstream media, U.S. Representative Lamar Smith of Texas recently admonished his constituents with the following advice: "Better to get your news directly from the president. In fact, it might be the only way to get the unvarnished truth" (Rutenberg, 2017, para. 9).

This could not have been said better by Xi Jinping himself! Over the past few years, the Chinese government has implemented regulations aimed at restricting the spread of online rumors and prohibiting the online publication of unverified news sourced from social media. China was focused on stamping out fake news long before it became a centerpiece of Trumpism. As Americans are now beginning to find, the fake-news problem cuts in all directions. In China it has provided a basis for the state to assert control. The ever-present threat of censorship has created China's own version of a posttruth world in which *all* news has become suspect, creating a vacuum for the government (with Lamar Smith cheering it on!) to fill with the only "official" and "reliable" news available (Tatlow, 2016). Although it might be foolish to suggest that state control of media in the United States could reach levels comparable to China, President Trump's willingness to undermine the legitimacy of independent journalism will certainly embolden other states to continue their efforts to control the production and flow of information as much as possible (Simon, 2017).

Yet although strong states like China clearly maintain the ability to regulate and control media by effectively shutting down distribution and access, by coercing publishers to fire journalists, or by simply detaining and disappearing them (Gladstone, 2015; Yu, 2014), the media also maintain a certain degree of power to shape the state's arena of action. This can be the case, for instance, when the media themselves display a greater degree of xenophobic nationalism than the state. In a study of media coverage of Sino-Japanese relations, in which the media were more likely to stoke anti-Japanese sentiment, Wang and Wang (2014) found that the Chinese state's diplomatic options concerning Japan were curtailed by media reporting on Japan. But as Hassid (2016) has argued, one should not forget that China remains home to many professional journalists who take seriously their professional role of holding government accountable. And Bayuni's article offers a useful reminder of this fact in the context of a now democratizing Indonesia.

Might the deepening privatization and individualization of media in Asia tip the balance away from state control and toward more media independence? Stockman (2013) has answered this question with an emphatic no, arguing that a freer commercial marketplace in China is no guarantee of independent journalism there. While media throughout Asia (with the obvious exception of North Korea) are no longer playing a straightforward propaganda role in relation to the state, they nevertheless continue to act like publicity agents, promoting the image of governments and their leaders by more nuanced and softer means. The ability of Asians to self-mediate on an individual scale has certainly not been lost on Asian states, which have themselves become more creative in asserting a presence in social media.

As has been increasingly the case in the United States and Europe, many journalists in Asia have moved from traditional media platforms to more flexible roles as content entrepreneurs who distribute content across multiple platforms. China has, for example, recently witnessed the emergence of WeMedia, a new buzzword based on the Chinese term *zimeiti*, or "self-media." While on the one hand China's traditional media have reacted to this with some alarm, with the *People's Daily* calling on the Chinese government to stamp out the "wild growth" of self-media in China (Lai, 2016), on the other hand, the state has been relatively savvy in exploiting the fuzzy boundary between official media such as *People's Daily* and informal media trends such as WeMedia. It would be wrong, then, to look for the rise of

independent (formal or informal) media existing fully outside of the state, though this itself varies greatly within Asia from state to state. In China and Singapore, it is fuzzy; in Taiwan and Indonesia, much less so.

Shanghai's *Pengpai* (The Paper) is a state-owned paper that has become a model for the kind of sleek innovation that appeals to a younger, cosmopolitan, globally and digitally savvy audience. As reported by Repnikova and Fang (2016):

As a state-funded experiment to win the hearts and minds of online readers, *Pengpai* is certainly walking a tightrope: on the one hand, it must self-censor, to a degree, as it belongs to the party, while on the other, it needs to respond to market forces and produce competitive reports that are critical and professional since the party wants to expand its influence. This balancing act, however, is not unique to *Pengpai*. All of China's media outlets renowned for critical reporting, including the more commercialized *Caixin* magazine and *Southern Weekly*, have been subjected to creative improvising in the gray zone of permissible reporting, with self-censorship being at the heart of their capacity to push the political boundaries in the long-term. (para. 5)

*Pengpai's* savvy commercialism makes clear why most academic accounts of the link between greater public access to privatized media in Asia and prospects for democratization remain ambivalent (Kenyon, Marjoribanks, & Whiting, 2014; Kwak, 2012; Zheng, 2014). Curtain's article reminds us that trying to draw a clear line between commercial and state media interests in Asia is problematic anyway. And despite the overall positive tenor of his commentary, Bayuni reminds us of the precarious relationship between media industries and democratization, and of democracy in Asian states more generally. While democracy in Indonesia promises, for Bayuni, a freer and fairer press, along with an opportunity for the Indonesian story to finally be told by Indonesians themselves, the challenges he lists are daunting.

Beyond journalism and informal social media, Asian entertainment industries such as Indian film, Korean television, and Japanese anime and manga are increasingly recognized as key players in relations among Asian states and between those states and the rest of the world. The deliberate harnessing of media platforms by Asian states for explicit soft-power objectives has been a growing phenomenon. The penetration of Asian broadcast media into Western markets (e.g., Al Jazeera and CCTV) perhaps marks an important shift in this trend, offering states a means to both get the right message to foreign audiences and to exert more influence within foreign media markets. Communication University of China professor Peng Duan (2016) conveys the hopes of the Chinese state well:

It is hoped that seizing the favourable trend of the currently continuously rising international status of China, the voice and image of China may be communicated to the world, and consequently, the soft power of China may be realistically enhanced. (p. 261)

Xi Jinping has explicitly called upon China's media sector to "tell China's story to the world better and become internationally influential" (Blanchard & Martina, 2016, para. 1).

It was recently reported with some alarm in the United States, however, that some 33 radio stations across the globe—including a dozen within the United States itself—have been operating “covertly” by China’s state-run China Radio International. According to the report, “These stations routinely air pro-Beijing propaganda” (Crovitz, 2015, para. 7). Although this is not much different from the role that Voice of America has played around the world for decades, the sense of alarm within the United States of its own media sovereignty being dented by China is a telling comment of how times have changed. That the Chinese state is guiding media outlets based in other countries is a concern that has also been raised in Australia, where agreements between Chinese and Australian media groups have raised concerns over what critics have called the acquiescence of Australia’s domestic media to Chinese messaging priorities (Monk, 2014). Similar concerns have been raised in Canada about self-censorship within Canada’s Chinese-language press in the face of China’s growing economic power there (Levin, 2016). These concerns reflect the ongoing tension explored in Curtin’s article especially, between the globalization of official media on the one hand and its nationalist mission on the other. The Australian concerns were, ironically, raised on the heels of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation signing a deal with Shanghai Media Group, allowing ABC market access within China for its Chinese-language site AustraliaPlus.cn. As Asian states demonstrate a newfound ability to infiltrate non-Asian media markets in the same way Western states have long been accustomed to doing, the politics of mediating Asia are bound to grow.

### **Conclusion**

Taken as a whole, this collection of articles offers an insightful commentary on and analysis of the dilemmas facing Asian states and societies as they seek to narrate their own stories to themselves and to the rest of the world through increasingly diffuse, globalized, and privatized media. In both unleashing and harnessing the power of these media, Asian states have struggled with the unintended consequences of their efforts to mediate Asia. These consequences have included the rise of informal media providing alternative narratives, transnational commercial media empires whose interests sometimes lie at odds with the state, and the growing assertiveness of an increasingly professionalized field of journalism.

These issues lie at the heart of the contemporary dynamics of Asia’s efforts to mediate itself, but they are hardly exhaustive. A noticeable absence in this collection, for instance, is the general lack of attention to local culture and the diversity of everyday life and how these are implicated in an increasingly self-mediating Asia. Personal identities throughout Asia are being socially mediated, as are celebrities and the experience of fandom, particularly in Japan and South Korea. New media technologies have impacted nearly every facet of everyday life in almost every corner of Asia, and they have changed how Asians represent themselves as individuals. They have generated new forms of popular culture and new economic practices and have enabled new forms of mobility and personal connection almost unimaginable even a decade ago. It is our hope that this collection spurs further inquiries into these and other untapped dimensions of the mediating Asia story.



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