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Digital Disruption in Asia

Power, Technology, and Society

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Abstract

This introduction to the fourth special issue of *Asiascape: Digital Asia* discusses the complex interactions between technology and society in the context of 'digital Asia'. The special issue is drawn from contributions to a conference held in May 2016 titled 'Digital Disruption in Asia: Methods and Issues'. Inspired by the idea that the use of digital technologies is shaking up some major political and economic institutions, the conference aimed to see whether some of the same processes were playing out across Asia. But while the wording of its title focused on the impact of digital technologies in Asian societies, what emerged were much more complex stories detailing the different ways the technologies are used in their offline contexts. This introduction traces these stories, identifying some common elements of digitality that range from constant connectivity, to mobility, speed, and the potential to break down social and even disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords

area studies – China – digital media – digital methods – digital politics – Indonesia – social shaping of technology – technological affordances

It may seem far-fetched to say that technologies can be infused with power, as if whizzing and humming down their very wires and tubes. Surely they are mere instruments, devoid of intrinsic values, sitting mute and available to be bent to the user's intention? On the contrary, the idea that certain technologies can be *predisposed* to producing particular social or political configurations has a long history. Even a scholar like Karl Marx, who epitomizes the idea that

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it is *social structures* that drive social change, recognized the societal implications of certain technologies. The steam engine, he thought, uniquely allowed the social relations of industrial capitalism to develop in the same way that the hand-mill had helped produce a feudalist society (Marx 1847 in Shaw 1979).

Such thoughts now risk being accused of 'technological determinism' – a fuzzy term denoting an emphasis on the power of the technologies in relation to its users or society. Versions of the same impulse for today's digital technologies claim the power of smartphones to reduce our attention span (Seung-Hyun 2015), or the peer-to-peer data sharing of social media to foment revolution (see Hirst 2012).

The alternative to a technologically deterministic viewpoint is one that emphasizes the role of societal negotiations in creating and adapting the nature of technologies (Klein & Kleinman 2002). In reality, anyone who seriously engages with these issues recognizes what Boczkowski (2004) calls a process of 'mutual shaping' – the symbiotic interaction of technologies and societies. And to save us from bouncing between technological and social determinism, we also have the idea of 'affordances' – the functional and relational aspects of a technology that do not *determine*, but rather *frame the possibilities for* action (Hutchby 2001). By enabling us to see the ways that technologies may limit, if not dictate, a certain set of possible actions, this useful concept allows the space for technologies to be both infused with intrinsic power *and* reflective of the societal relations in which they are embedded.

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This special issue is drawn from contributions to a conference held in May 2016 titled 'Digital Disruption in Asia: Methods and Issues'.[1] Inspired by the idea that the use of digital technologies is shaking up some major political and economic institutions (Owen 2016), it aimed to see whether some of the same processes were playing out across Asia. But while the wording of its title focused on the *impact* of digital technologies in Asian societies, what emerged during the course of the two days were much more complex stories detailing the different ways the technologies are used in their offline contexts.

In the last few years, the impulse to 'de-Westernize' research on digital media has given us a growing number of studies from around the world (see also

1 This conference was funded by the Computational Humanities Programme of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) through the Elite Network Shifts project based at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), and the Asian Modernities and Traditions Fund at Leiden University.

Schneider & Goto-Jones 2015). Some highlight the way that the online environment serves diverse cultural expression, arguing against the notion that digital life homogenizes human experience (Miller & Slater 2000; Chan 2014). Others identify and develop non-Western social concepts, such as *guanxi*, as alternative frames to understand digital media practices (Liu 2014; Lim 2016). And within the social sciences, research that adds empirical detail to understanding the internet's role in freedom of speech and democratization comes from all over the world (Postill 2014; MacKinnon 2011; Aouragh & Alexander 2011).

Those of us with interests in particular areas of the world can also bring our culturally and historically contextualized knowledge about those places to the implications of certain behaviours and practices around digital technologies. This is a slightly different (but related) task from identifying the 'domestication' of technologies, which seeks to uncover the unanticipated ways that different groups of users can use the same technologies (Haddon 2006). Rather, it is about interpreting the meaning of a certain technologically mediated activity from within a country context.

Pan Weixian begins this special edition doing just that. Drawing attention to the ubiquity of photographs taken on mobile phones of Beijing's smog, Pan makes a case for understanding such visual documentation as 'digital capture', distinct from the more familiar forms of 'digital activism'. Where the success or failure of digital activism is usually judged by the degree to which it circumvents state censorship or supports mass-mobilization, the value of digital capture lies more in its potential to create a space of civil negotiation.

To consider environmental activism in China is usually to identify non-governmental groups, highlight their institutional dynamics and collaborations, and then recognize the political and legal restrictions under which they work. By contrast, Pan's approach includes the more mundane digital practices of image capture, which may not be aimed at opposing the state but nevertheless enable a growing number of Beijing's population to reconfigure their relationship to the state. Such practices may not seem to have much political import when interpreted within the context of developed formal democracies, but in the Chinese context they hold a different, perhaps more significant, meaning.

None of this would be possible without the intrinsic mobility of the devices used to capture these images, and it is this technological affordance that Acep Muslim takes up in his piece on 'digital religion' in Indonesia.

Detailing the inner workings of an online Islamic recitation group, One Day One Juz (ODOJ), Muslim highlights the way that the 'mobility, portability, and connectivity embedded in the device' become part of the 'architecture' of the group. By making use of an already popular messaging platform, WhatsApp,

and a mobile phone, ODOJ maintains an 'always availability' where its members are constantly connected to the group. It is this constant connectivity, he goes on to argue, that makes the practice of digital religion more than just bringing offline activities into online spaces.

Muslim has more to say about how the interplay of offline contexts and online architectures make up the disciplinary mechanisms ODOJ employs to support its members' religious practices, fleshing out the idea that the online environment affords new and unique ways to channel authority, if not power.

This can also be seen in Michael Keane and Chen Ying's examination of the Chinese state's use of the internet to project its international image. Like Pan, Keane and Chen want to move beyond the usual academic focus on the struggle between state control and online activism when discussing the internet in China. Examining instead how the internet enables the dissemination of a state-sanctioned Chinese 'cultural presence' to the outside world, they present something very different from the old megaphone techniques that government departments previously employed.

Instead, what we find today is a set of complex interactions among the 'official carriers' (government departments), 'digital platforms' (e-commerce and social network sites), and 'users.' It is a delicate balance between these three components. The biggest digital platforms receive government support and are expected in return to help develop smaller firms, but if they act too overtly as carriers of propaganda, they jeopardize profitability. User-producers repurpose, parody, and comment – sometimes patriotic, sometimes hostile to the state.

To further conceptualize such media convergence in China, Keane and Chen go on to describe an emerging 'digital ecology', which is shifting from 'state culture' (a closed system) to 'services' (an open system) to 'knowledge' (a complex ecosystem). The implications for such an analysis are many, not least what it says about the nature of the Chinese state's ambition to appropriate a kind of techno-utopianism in its international image. What struck me though, as a non-Sinologist, is the way that the use of the internet affords the disruption of boundaries. If, in the past, it was easier to demarcate state, business, and civil society interests and activities in the media environment, today those silos are breaking down. It reminds me of the other boundaries that are said to have broken down with the advent of the internet – national borders become *in some ways* less important; users and producers of media merge in online content; the difference between work and family life becomes less clear when work has become so portable on laptops and smart phones; and distinct public and private spheres of life break down through the use of social media.

Marina Svensson's much needed reflection on the methods we, as researchers, use in the digital age, also grapples with the moving target of public/private distinctions. Urging us to see the online environment not as a place to collect data, but as a 'field where researchers practice,' she details some issues involved when engaging with informants on social media platforms, particularly in an authoritarian political system like China.

There are, of course, great benefits for researchers who are themselves active on social media. It not only helps to understand how people integrate social media into their everyday life, but also results in a 'thicker' understanding and more 'embodied' experience of what it means to be living in the Chinese (digital) society.

Noting that her informants' use of social media pushed their own boundaries of what constitutes private, professional, and personal domains – a potentially risky move in the Chinese context – she also reflects on the decisions that researchers must take when deciding how much personal information to post and share with informants. In some ways, she recognizes that this may be a moot point, given the general increased visibility of researchers online through their own efforts to publicize their research. Svensson postulates that an unintended consequence of such visibility may well be a more transparent, and therefore more equal, relationship between the researcher and the researched.

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Offering a shorter think-piece on his experience of co-ordinating a 'digital humanities' project in the following section on p.?, Gerry Van Klinken also considers the permeability of boundaries, but this time in relation to disciplinary conventions within the academy. Using computational text analysis on hundreds of thousands of Indonesian newspapers, the overall goal of the project was to draw out information about political elite networks. The expectation of the broader programme under which the project was funded was that digital methods would help break down disciplinary differences, effectively 'making the humanities more like the natural sciences' (Mulder 2016). But while the use of computational methods may promote 'post-disciplinarity' by focusing only on the data, Van Klinken finds that the key to the project's success was actually its *adherence* to existing disciplinary boundaries.

Jack Qiu and Joy Lin round off this special issue, grounding us in the materiality of the digital with their analysis of the working conditions inside one of the Chinese factories that produce our mobile phones, Foxconn. In stark contrast to the narrative of digital technologies as 'liberating, uplifting, and modernizing', the article shows that if we shift our attention to the *production* of digital devices, then they become agents of serious social regression. Making

a powerful comparison between the Foxconn labour regime and seventeenth-century slave conditions, the authors highlight the brutality of guards at the factories, management efforts to reduce labour mobility, the dormitory conditions of workers, and most tellingly, the use of 'anti-jumping nets' to try to reduce worker suicides.

Is there something *intrinsic* to the nature of digital devices that makes them prone to slave-like conditions in the production processes? The concept of velocity is often related to the advent of digital technologies, producing what some have termed an 'acceleration society' (Rosa 2013). Similarly, the production of digital devices, particularly the Apple products that Foxconn produces, embody a version of this in the 'planned obsolescence' of their products, which encourage consumers to continually buy new devices every year. The assembly lines of Shenzhen, the Chinese city where Foxconn is based, reflect these dynamics and are known not only for their intensive and pressurised working conditions, but also how quickly the machine tools can be redeployed for new products (Roy 2011).

To be sure, such pressures are not unique to the mobile phone industry and have some similarities with the concept of 'fast fashion' in the garment manufacturing – another industry that is subject to ever changing fashions, strict deadlines, and intensive production processes (Taplin 2014; Nakamura 2011). Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is a common thread linking 'digital velocity' with the late capitalist factory regimes of a city whose name has become so synonymous with the concept that it has entered the popular lexicon as 'Shenzhen speed'.

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This wonderfully diverse set of papers shows just how many different approaches can be taken when studying the interaction of technologies and societies. With only the word 'digital' in common, this special issue gives us reflections on technologies as an expressive medium, a research field, a research tool and a material product. But by referencing the digital, all the authors necessarily promise their readers not just a description of societal encounters with digital technologies, but also a reflection on what the particular form of digitality means for how those encounters play out.

As I have described them, I have detected here some common elements of that digitality, ranging from constant connectivity, to their mobility, speed, and potential to break down social and even disciplinary boundaries. Such technological affordances will be familiar to those acquainted with the wider literature on digital technologies, but the different ways they both limit and expand

opportunities for action are decidedly contextual. And if, as one scholar says, the role of technologies in society 'depends on the locally contingent meanings that people attribute to them' (Wajcman 2015: 33), then what we may be left with in the end is a return to the diversity of human experience that is the founding principle of area studies.

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