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CYBER-COLONIALISM IN ASIA: MORE IMAGINED THAN REAL?

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ABSTRACT:

Political reactions to the assumed cultural hegemonic potentials of the Internet is not new. 'Media imperialism' ('cyber-colonialism' in the context of our paper) has been touted as the premise by newly independent states to break out of the vicious cycle of being dominated by Western cultural semiotics, consumerism and liberal-democratic political ideas. Our paper will address the limitations of the 'cyber-colonialism' theory and argue that Asia should respond to the Internet by mustering an "Asian" collective consciousness and getting it heard and represented in cyberspace. We propose that Asians have to stake its position and work out new ways for self-expression and representation on the Internet. While this paper recognizes the historical trappings of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the region, we will argue that what is needed is a reorientation of our mindset for understanding the dynamics of 'cultural dominance' and assertion.

Deconstructing Old Concepts

Nation states ¹ as a political entity is increasingly being seen as a foundering concept with the unintended cultural, social, and economic transformations engendered by realtime interactive communication through the Internet. Undergoing similar conceptual change is the finite notion of spatial distance and cultural divides; public sphere and private space. □□ Forms and contents of discourses are continually being re-shaped and re-presented by the dynamics of interactivity in the hypermedia environment. The Internet has practically created a sense of virtual interconnectivity, beginning somewhat ironically with McLuhan's imagined "global village" ² of the 60s.

Just as UNESCO ³ drew the world's attention to the way richer Western nations have used their mass media systems to dominate and shape world public opinion, the same thesis is now being used by newly independent states to react to new realities in the electronic space. Central to communicating across borders is the question of preserving one's cultural sovereignty and identity. For instance, France has passed legislation to quota the use of English on the Net; Namibia tried to quash it; China is forcing local computer networks to use only approved links; Malaysia is drafting a national information technology agenda; and the Singapore is working towards filtering Internet contents.

The Internet as an information networking channel is undisputably the most effective mode, since teleconferencing and satellite broadcasting, for forging public (global) discourse. This has engendered contradictory concerns among governments who, while recognising the technological benefits of jumping on the electronic bandwagon, are uncertain as to how their citizens will respond to the influx of new post-modernist ideas prevalent in cyberspace. The intuitive impression is the Internet has exposed new areas of vulnerabilities, causing countries to be wary of unintended consequences of for instance the constant

¹ Kenichi Ohmae (1995) *The End of the Nation State - The Rise of Regional Economies*, Free Press Paperbacks, Singapore.

² Deibert, Ronald J. (1997). *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation*. New York: Columbia University Press, p 199

³ In 1972, Unesco drew the world's attention to the way richer Western nations have used their media communication systems to dominate world public opinion vis-a-vis their geopolitical interests. Since then the movement towards a new world information order (NWIO) are being shrouded by cries of "media imperialism" and "neo-colonialism" by Third World governments (the Prime Minister of Malaysia being one of the most outspoken) in their limited success to re-organize the global communication channels.

bombardment of profanity, racial hatred, blasphemy and right wing political ideas through cyberspace.

In the case of Australia (or Asia for that matter), being largely dependent on the United States for most of its computer-based needs, the feeling is the country is gradually becoming a "technological colony" which entails "greater foreign control of crucial sectors of information industries, [and] structural change whose agenda □□is set elsewhere" beyond the borders of Japan, United States and Europe. ⁴

Political reactions to the assumed cultural hegemonic potentials of the Internet is not new. 'Media imperialism' ('cyber-colonialism' in the context of our paper) has been used for more than five decades as the premise by newly independent states to break out of the vicious cycle of being dominated by Western cultural semiotics, consumerism and liberal-democratic political ideas.

What makes the age-old concerns of media and cultural imperialism by the NWIO proponents in the 70s more pertinent in the digital age has much to do with Internet's interactive nature. The power of interactiveness with its potential to engender chaotic behaviour and anarchic ideas in the public sphere has made the Internet the most intrusive medium in the flows of information and knowledge to date -- bringing into focus a rethinking of our old conceptions of territoriality, power and control.

One recalls that these finite concepts are deeply embedded in a world system used to understanding information flows and human interaction through a set of gratifications expected from media usage and a certain degree of communicative predictability. Among closed political cultures that are used to governing in this system of relative order, expectability and control, Internet's pervasiveness and cultural imprints have created new waves of technophobic apprehensions, or in the context of our paper, 'neo-colonialistic anxieties'.

Against this context, we see Internet as a revolutionary medium, restructuring the way old things are done; and the way conventional ideas are re-invented. It has created new markets for a whole class of digitally stored materials with its own economies of scale. Online data bases are now a commodity in their own right. Reporters and their readers can have immediate access to the files of newspapers throughout the world ⁵ to the extent that online information storage

⁴ Cunningham, Stuart, as quoted in Ward, Ian (1995) Politics of the Media, Macmillan Education Australia, p.283.

⁵ See for example Washington Post World Reference at:
www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/inatl/longterm/worldref.

now occurs not as a separate part of the information process but as an integral part of the production process itself.

At its best, Internet's speed has replaced the distance between cities and cultures regardless of their central or peripheral positioning in the international power relations circle. The pace by which the Internet and its corollary applications is currently being embraced by the rich and poor nations have impacted significantly on the global cultural milieu. The arrival of the Internet is best summed up by Grossman as an example of the "law of unintended consequences run amok."⁶ Thus, at its worst, Internet is seen as a medium of chaos and uncontrollability.

As a social network the Internet is as good as its constituents of individuals, interest groups and its yet unwritten 'code of ethics'. Its usefulness and communicative value is ultimately dependent on what gets disseminated and shared on the network. Paradoxically, abundance of information provided by the Internet has not necessarily created an abundance of usable knowledge -- defined differently across political and cultural contexts. Some Asian governments have contended that what's really selling in the Internet is more pornography and online entertainment than real 'education'. Controls and filtering of Internet contents, ironically, is thus seen to be a form of 'liberation' from the clutches of 'neo-colonial' cultural products and ideas.

As Asian governments and policy makers mull over the rationale of instituting controls and grasp with the rampaging fuzzy ideology peddled on the Internet, many realized that they have little options but to utilise the technology from within the operating ethos and intellectual structures fostered by the mainly American techno-visionaries. The dilemma is that with the Internet culture, controls imposed by external parties only tend to spur a parallel search by netizens, computer hackers and savvy users for ways of breaking or avoiding the control measures.

External control, as the Malaysian government has acknowledged, cannot provide the solution. What holds greater promise is to create a critical learning environment to empower local users of the new technology.

As the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim noted, "the cultural re-empowerment of Asia will be a tremendous force in the shaping of the new global cultural order ... but this possibility can be realised only if there is a

⁶ Lawrence K. Grossman (1994). Reflections on Life Along the Electronic Superhighway. In *Media Studies Journal*, 8 (1), Winter, p32.

genuine intellectual and cultural revival ... the information revolution must serve us as a vehicle that brings about a great re-awakening." ⁷

Likewise, Singapore has made a strong commitment to laying down the physical infrastructure necessary for this future and hopes to have 95% of its homes wired for digital services by the end of the century and the state itself runs ten "Internet Clubs" where citizens can currently access the Internet; and private "Internet Cafes" have sprung up across the city. ⁸

Against this reality, our paper will address the limitations of the 'cyber-colonialism' theory and argue that the issue is not so much about the infiltration of Western cultural hegemony into Asian cultural space and preservation of its cultural identity, thus the need for governmental interference in the dissemination of Internet contents. The issue is more of how Asia can respond proactively to Western domination in cyberspace by mustering an "Asian" collective consciousness, getting it re-presented on the Internet.

While this paper recognizes the historical trappings of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the region, it proposes that the Internet is "no more American than electricity. It may have been invented (in America), but electrons have no national allegiance." ⁹ We will argue that what is needed instead is a reorientation of our mindset for understanding the dynamics of 'cultural dominance' and cultural assertion. We propose that Asians have to stake its position and work out new ways for self-expression and representation on the Internet. Based on its open autonomous communication platform the Internet could effectively provide a channel for democratizing local, regional and international discourse rather than, as presumed, marginalise communities into the "haves" and "have nots" within the global information village. □□

The Consequence of the Internet: Deconstructing Old Fears

From Europe to Asia, demagogues decry new risks to ancient cultures, identities and traditional values due to the proliferation of American iconic presence in cyberspace. To them, "Americaphobia" on the Internet is ideologically threatening (though not necessarily warranted) on the premise that a majority of the netizen gurus are from the United States. The quantity of content generated

⁷ Speech delivered at the AMIC annual conference on "Asia's Communication Challenges," Kuala Lumpur, June 19, 1997.

⁸ Helen Chang, "Singapore Wakes Up and Smells the Internet," Business Week, March 25, 1996.

⁹ Douglas Rushkoff, (1996). Americaphobia and the Engineered Fear of Progress, Paper presented at Conference on the Internet and Society, Harvard University, May 28-31.

from American netizens have been described as a force that absorb and deconstruct and then reassemble the soul.¹⁰

The presence of America as the current dominant user and developer of the Internet is due to its origin in the United States as a defense communication system in 1969 (ARPANET) and thus its early lead in innovative applications and market share. Before long, this lead will be history. For instance, Netscape browsers and support services are already available in French, with Chinese and Japanese on the way. German, Hebrew, Italian and Russian are also fairly well represented on the Net, with translation programs available for some 75 languages.

"For the most part, the Internet invasion did take root first on American soil. But that doesn't mean that the Net was immediately Americanized; rather, it seems to me that America was internetized by the emergence of cyberculture within the nation's formerly discrete boundaries. If the Internet looks American to those who are first engaging it now, it's only because American culture has already been fundamentally altered by technology." (Rushkoff, 1996, *ibid*).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the bulk of the wired communities are still located in the United States, with about 12 per cent in Europe, and 10 per cent each in Australia and Asia. While statistics on the Internet have a very short history, they are for the purpose of our paper indicative of the skewed distribution of Internet connectivity towards North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia -- countries that together account for less than 20 per cent of the world's population. Africa, Asia and South America with its inadequate communication infrastructure have yet to make its presence noticed in cyberspace.

Before the Internet, the global agenda and public debates within territorially defined political spaces were mainly set by Western transnational media agencies.¹¹ To theorists such as Chomsky and Herman, they were tools used by the dominant centers of power to manufacture consent and shape the contours of public ideology for their own interests.¹² In the hypermedia environment, the conventions of dominant discourse is slowly being replaced by a decentered, personalized interactive dialogue. Ironically, the pervasiveness of the new medium has created a new form of "narrowcasting" where special interest

¹⁰ See Barber, Benjamin R. and Andrea Shultz (1996) *Jihad Vs McWorld*, NY:Ballantine Books.

¹¹ Schiller, Herbert and Nordenstreng, Kaarle (eds) (1979). *National Sovereignty and International Communication*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, pp 84-115.

¹² See Chomsky, Noam and Herman, Edward (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

groups previously unheard of are getting their voices heard in the 'virtual community' described by Howard Rheingold as an "ecosystem of subcultures".¹³

Theoretical Limitations of 'Cybercolonialism'

From the presence of Coca-Cola in Laos and McDonalds in Manila to the transmission of news by Western agencies around the globe, the descriptors "cultural" and "media imperialism" have been used to describe any situation which connotes an imbalance in economic, information and intercultural exchange. "Cyber-colonialism" is similarly used as a corollary to describe the Western dominance in cyberspace. The question is, are they apt descriptors? We think not for the following reasons:

(1) The Internet, while understandably seen by countries with a weak technological base as a tool of Western economic and cultural expansionism, has demonstrated its empowering mechanism for minority groups in the international fora. As the Internet facilitates many to many communication (heterarchy), cyberspace is a haven for diversity in intellectual and cultural discourse. This "coca-colonization", the very homogenization of culture feared by those opposed to the development of a "McWorld", will actually foster demand for difference.

Information access, gathering and dissemination have thus undergone radical changes through the Internet as a global communication medium used with complete ease by the average household, governments, universities, businesses and the whole array of grassroots movements. Minority cultural groups, previously invisible in the public sphere, now have affordable access to a channel to make their voice heard on a global scale – thus eschewing the beginnings of a slightly more equitable marketing of information (and knowledge) – this time from the South to the North from on-line higher education and global media links to the networking of NGOs. (See Asian Journalism Network at: www.uow.edu.au/crearts/journalism/media.html)

Focusing on the ideological baggage would run the risk of overlooking the Internet as an innovative open communication medium. Rushkoff noted that certainly "there is an ideological agenda implicit to the Internet; yet, it's not really libertarian, though it sometimes looks that way, and it's not really democratic, though it sometime looks that way, too" (see <http://vukovar.unm.edu/arkzin/actual/apple.html>). Driven by innovative pursuit, the Internet works towards yielding better ideas and designs ("Asian

¹³ Rheingold, Howard (1993). *Virtual Communities*. New York: Addison-Wesley. p3.

Renaissance"?),¹⁴ which eventually replace the old ones. "By getting online, any culture gains the opportunity to spread its own iconography back to the rest of the world." Rushkoff states that the charges of American imperialism is nothing more than a "a ruse designed to rile up citizens into ethnocentric isolationism...what governments really fear is what their own unfettered populations might do with the power of the media (see <http://vukovar.unm.edu/arkzin/actual/apple.html>).

'Cybercolonialism', as defined from a one-dimensional historical perspective, could be realised if Asian governments continue to regard themselves as victims on the captive end of global information flow. The Internet, rooted in post-modern ideals of power relations, will work towards the empowerment of those who have been marginalized in the mainstream media. Asian societies which have long complained about the imbalance in the flow of information and misrepresentation by the global media corporations can now make a difference in becoming heard through the Internet.

(2) Colonialism in theory was characterised by a systematic political process of imposing foreign control and coercing foreign values, political, social and economic systems from above (the West) onto indigenous cultures and traditions with little or no popular support from the local people. Its epistemology assumes a vulnerability of indigenous cultures to foreign domination. It implies a purity of indigenous cultures but ignores the processes of acculturation via mediated communication in developing a hybrid cultural identity.

The reductionistic cyber colonialism concept assumes that anything prepackaged from Hollywood, Silicon Valley or the West (i.e. the US and Europe) are simply absorbed by the East and results in a transformation (or Westernization) of cultural identity, values and attitudes. In the global village there are disparate cultures and subcultures. Prescribed meanings of foreign media products are not read the same way across cultures. Media messages and contents, although homogenised to a certain extent in the transmission through the Internet, are easily differentiated and contextualised in their reception across cultures, from Thailand and Tibet to Singapore and Sri Lanka, as provided for by the hyper-links in the Web space. Likewise, cultural production centers now emerging from Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are no longer centralized in the West with provisions of multi-user domain applications in the Internet.

With the Internet, one needs to consider the potential of symbiosis of cultural nuances and intellectual discourse leading to a hybridised form of cultural production. The hybridisation engendered by communication on the Net is far

¹⁴ Anwar Ibrahim, *Asian Renaissance*, Kuala Lumpur, 1997.

less direct and less culturally directed. This is in contrast to the explicit imposition of social, cultural and political values from the center to the periphery during the Cold War. Through its conceptual hyperlinks and layers of interactivity, Internet eschews a more globalised form of interconnectivity (and interdependency) . In fact, Internet provides the near perfect medium to free up indigenous communication capabilities and access to diverse sources of information.

On the Internet, no one culture can truly dominate as the exposure to and reception of information is from the user rather than the source. Based on its design, the Internet passes control of navigating information to the user. It allows people to decide what they want and when. No one can be forcefully exposed to information that could undermine their cultural sovereignty unless so desired. In other words, unlike the linear access to and reception of information in the traditional media, the multi-hypertext flow of information on the Internet levels the playing field. "It challenges the divine right of social institutions, whose ability to post an insightful or provocative Web page is no greater than yours or mine. The Net returns social intercourse to its natural state, empowers users to muddle through the unstructured web of information where anything can happen.

(See "www.vukovar.unm.edu/arkzin/actual/apple.html").

(3) "Cyber-colonialism" as a term is premised on the "media imperialism" theory expounded in the 1970s. Underpinning the theory is the inter-relationships between economic, territorial, cultural and informational factors the epistemology of which is being redefined by the dynamic nature of the Internet. The theory assumes that media ownership and structure directly determines the contents transmitted to a mass audience, and then read and interpreted according to the meanings intended by the producers. This media-centered communication model further assumes that the audience are passive consumers of mediated texts. This theory has been refuted by the media-user centered argument that the audience are made up of critical and intelligent individuals who are inclined to process mass mediated information according to their individual needs.

(4) The 'colonialism' theory rests on the thesis of ownership and control. It assumes that media ownership naturally leads to absolute control of its contents. It was partially true with the Big Four Agencies – AP, Reuters, AFP and UPI – in the 70s when international news coverage were defined by the political interests of the host nations. While not overtly imposing its news culture on the less developed nations, the attitude then was Third World media had little choice. However, with the open environment of the Internet, ownership of the communication medium is more diverse and diffused. Internet's message/products are mainly being produced for a global audience that are no

longer Western dominated. Now, there are broader choices providing broader textual contexts -- thus deviating from the Western paradigm to a multi-perspectival framing of international affairs. The concept of a "headquarter" or a communication base is less clear with the decentralized structure of the Internet which is under the control of neither a single manager nor a commercial or political entity. The medium is built up by innovators from around the globe and sustained by techno-savvy 'Netizens' who are passionately protective of Internet's open platform. That is how it will remain.¹⁵ The monopoly of knowledge by media organizations has become more diffused, diverse and uncontrollable. Anyone can become a publisher on the Internet and reach a notoriety of influence (as seen in the rise of Matt Drudge vis-a-vis Bill Clinton's sexual romp with a White House intern; or in the case of Australia, international right wing support for Pauline Hanson via her home page).

(5) Talk of colonialism and imperialism tend to promote the ideals of an isolationist ethnocentric cultural identity. In Singapore, for instance, the government has a tendency to give more bite to its "cultural" rather than digital infrastructure. While the government hopes to completely wire the city state into an intelligent island by the year 2000, it will do so without compromising the country's 'national ideology' and value system.¹⁶ In line with the modernist thinking, the attempt is to center the self and identity in a stable and unchanging set of common attributes shared by the community. However, for the Internet, the postmodern view of the self and identity thrives. As noted by Sampson, the postmodernist self is a "subject who is multi-dimensional, and without center or hierarchical integration."¹⁷ Unlike the centered cultural identity prized by the Singapore government, the local cybernauts will have a sense of individuality that is characterized by a historically contingent, multiple or "decentered" self. Such a cultural identity could truly be Singaporean nor American for that matter.

With its decentralized structure Internet may not even occupy the central position in the cultural landscape of Asia. In some cases, Internet could be marginal to the people's cultural experience such as in isolated countries like Laos and Tibet. Thus, the concept of media hegemony may no longer be relevant to Asia. The focused fear on 'cyber-colonialism' will blind us to the fact

¹⁵ While it is true that the role of the mediator, such as a browser, with specific filtering tools, could become the message especially if Microsoft monopolizes and becomes the industry standard, the company's domination is most unlikely as the Internet takes new forms and weave new webs.

¹⁶ Asia and the Internet: Not Too Modern Please, *The Economist*, March 16, 1996: p 42.

¹⁷ Sampson, E.E., quoted in Deibert, Ronald J. (1997). *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation*. New York: Columbia University Press, p 182.

that Internet could just as easily facilitate a greater flow of Asian news texts and cultural semiotics, intellectual and philosophical discourse to the West. With the demise of "nation-states" as a basis of international relations we will be remiss in foreshadowing the assumed deleterious impact of the Internet on 'cultural identity' and 'national sovereignty'.

Shaking Off The "Cyber-Colonialism" Anxiety

It must be categorically stated that the Internet continues to be a novel form of mass communication, with many uncertain as to its final form and audience. Faced with the uncertainties of what the digital future holds, it is easy to understand the suspicions of former colonized victims of Western empires.

As the potential and threats of the Internet remains anyone's guess, the haste which Asian governments are resorting to censor, monitor or restrict (access) to the Internet has raised questions as to the rationality of these actions. The knee-jerk reactions may be indicative of the government's anticipation of Internet's inherent power as a medium for mobilizing public opinion, political dissent and protest movements; while at the same time overlooking the interactive medium as a tool for developing its human capital through the force of knowledge and information exchange.

It is hard to judge the rationale behind the steps different countries take to preserve their cultural identity, community values, language and existing control over the dissemination of information. As stated by Sandfort in his Wired article on censorship of the Internet in Singapore, "...that every government, every society, has limited freedom - to some degree - in the hopes of increasing prosperity. Where that line is drawn may be nothing more than an arbitrary cultural artifact." ¹⁸

As such, it is futile for Asian governments to articulate for regulating the Internet along the rhetorics of cultural domination. As asserted by Singapore's Ambassador at large, Tommy Koh, many of the Asian countries "... (are) liberating (themselves) psychologically from the Western dominance of the last 200 years" and emerging from "...a long night of subjugation, poverty, backwardness, and pessimism into the dawn of prosperity, progress, optimism, and self-confidence." ¹⁹

¹⁸ Sandy Sandfort. The Intelligent Island. In Wired, Issue 1.4, September/October 1995.

¹⁹ Singapore Straits Times, January 8, 1998.

Understood in this mindset, to use the arguments of colonialism or imperialism for the Internet, where the impact remains unknown, is pointless. Ultimately, how one reacts to that fact depends on whether one believes the freedom of speech, as defined in the UN Charter, to be a universal right or a standard to be defined differently by each community. Regardless of which interpretation one is sympathetic to, what is more important is to recognize that the attempts to curb the Internet could encourage the cyber-colonialism which governments purport to counter.

By depriving the local populace the voice and participation in the already crowded information highway, especially by American netizens, it is only to be expected that the global imagined community of the Internet is relatively homogeneous in cultural content. Through strategies of control, Asian governments have done themselves a grave disservice by self-imposing their own marginalization in cyberspace.

This paper proposes that Asian governments should distance themselves from the ideological fetters that no longer make sense and capitalize on the Internet as an agent of empowerment and change in the discourse of East-West relations. Asian countries, to assert their presence in cyberspace, must begin to focus on the production and dissemination of their own cultural products online. Asian governments must realize that the Internet environment represents a major platform to have their stories told and heard to a variety of captivated communities. What is perhaps a significant aspect of these communities is the extent to which they are not bound by traditional notions of "territory" and "geographical place" as prerequisites for membership.

The emerging mediascape of cyberspace will comprise a decentered, multiperspectival universe of imagined communities with a "diverse subnational and supranational sovereignty-free actors." What this means to Asian nations is that the discourse of colonialism, the visceral underpinning of their shift towards modernity, is being replaced by 'nichelism', what Deibert calls a "polytheistic universe of multiple and overlapping fragmented communities above and below the sovereign nation-state." Under such terms, the threat of losing one's cultural identity and values disappears and the work towards building a better-informed global citizenry can begin. The first step towards this direction for Asian governments must start with enhancing public access and participation on the Internet. Meanwhile, it will be more constructive to reflect on how Asia can assert its Asian perspectives in cyberspace, and devise ways to capitalise on the medium to reawake an "Asian Renaissance" in the virtual community.

Moving Towards Digital Empowerment

The burning question about the Internet is about control to many governments. The Internet was originally designed for maximum survivability, and that this quality implies an inherent resistance to control. By coming to terms with the fact that attempting to control the Internet will be problematic, what could be more meaningful is to be concerned with the issue of establishing standards and ethical guidelines -- much like the conventional print and broadcast media -- rather than regulations.

These standards, defined within the parameters of cultural, political and social considerations, can be promoted as the guideline for productive interaction with the new medium. Such an approach is pro-active as it empowers the people to become intelligent and responsible users of the technology and dismisses accusations of draconian tactics by government or any organizations to censor information.

This proposal to rid governing bodies of the control mentality towards the Internet is not founded upon baseless and liberal political rhetorics. The pragmatic rationale for this proposal concerns the question that as the Internet grows, driven by competition and market forces, can it be truly controlled?

Take the case of traditional news journalism versus the presence of unfiltered content on the Internet. One of the reasons why the Internet is becoming a powerful force of news has to do with the nature of news that is being produced on this medium. From news sites such the "The Drudge Report", known for playing fast and loose with the facts, to traditional standards of news reporting is being challenged. Operating his online news web site without the cautious eye of editors and other checks and balances present in the traditional newsroom, Matt Drudge, new media maverick behind The Drudge Report, has been breaking stories that have made headlines in the mainstream presses.

While many journalists questioned the Drudge's style of no-holds-barred journalism, what is interesting is that he has forced many traditional news organizations to break their own cardinal rules and jump on the online medium. In the recent alleged presidential sex scandal involving Bill Clinton and an intern, The Washington Post and Newsweek Magazine have elected to post their online rather than waiting for the next print edition following posting of the story on The Drudge Report (Editor and Publisher, 29 January 1998 - www.mediainfo.com/ephome/news/newshtm/stories/012398n3.htm).

Usually the norm for The Washington Post and Newsweek is to break the stories in the print editions before going online. But due to the fear of being scooped by every other online news publications, these traditional news organizations are

now realizing the nature of breaking news coverage will never be the same again and that newspapers will have to adjust further to that unsettling fact.

The attraction of unfiltered, first-person accounts and up-to-the-second updates news on the Internet is breaking new grounds in the way news is being reported and understood. Traditional journalism professionals are acknowledging the growing importance of the Internet in getting the news out faster but do not feel threatened by this medium as they are

confident that many readers still prefer "to read the paper on paper, even when they've read the story on the Web."

(www.mediainfo.com/ephome/news/newshtm/stories/012398n3.htm).

What irks the present journalism profession is the lack of standards in the Drudge's type of reporting which is, in reality, attracting a growing number of readers who prefer this news format. This realization comes at a time when a recent survey found that nearly half of America's newspaper editors believe the country's press coverage is just as "shallow and inadequate," and tend to favor "dullness." The survey, conducted by New York-based Editor & Publisher also reported that one in five of those interviewed said that the coverage is inaccurate.

With this growing skepticism towards the products by traditional news journalism, it is not surprising that online journalism, with or without standards, may be gaining some degree of acceptance by both editors and the public. This emerging trend in news reporting highlights the obvious fact that there is a growing preference for content on the Internet, regardless of its credibility and reliability. While content providers and software engineers work out the technical dynamics to enable users to differentiate the facts from the rumors, one thing is obvious - it is impossible to totally censor information once it is posted on the Internet.

The one exception is advertising in newsgroups, in which case the users on that group will harass the offending user into compliance with the newsgroup netiquette. This is not to say that there is information which has no place on the net, everything has its place; what is not suitable for newsgroups is suitable for the WWW or listservs or bulletin boards or e-mail.

The impossibility of completely controlling content flow on the Internet is not new news to advocates pushing for tough regulations. In Singapore, for instance, the Minister of Information, George Yeo, admits that there is no way the government can "protect" the citizens of Singapore from the "bad stuff" on the Internet. According to Yeo, "(t)he point of censorship is symbolic. It establishes a difference between what is right and what is wrong. It is what keeps a society together and aware of what it stands for. The

fact that we sin every day is not a reason to abolish the Ten Commandments. Indeed, it is precisely because we sin every day that we need the Ten Commandments."

Besides content, the Singapore government also allowed the establishment of three Internet Service Providers. In the country of slightly more than three million that is pushing towards a wired city by the year 2000, Pacificnet, Singnet and Cybernet, have become instant oligopolies in a market that certainly would benefit the consumers with greater competition. While the government insists that the decision to allow three ISPs is based on solid business principles, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that limiting technological choices in terms of access and bandwidth are equally powerful strategies of control. Controlling the technology is nothing more than a temporary measure as it will become ineffective when the Internet becomes as common as indoor plumbing.

The justifications for censoring the Internet by the Singapore government, though they may appear flawed to many in the Western world, lie at the heart of the control controversy - should the decision to regulate the Internet, i.e. deciding what is right and wrong, be the prerogative of the government or an organized authority, or should it be left to the people (self-government)? Our paper tends to lean to the latter.

Asian nations can benefit so much more if they allow the Internet to develop in their societies, free of any restrictions and controls, as the technology is one of empowerment and not colonialization. As we have argued earlier in the paper, the rhetoric of cyber-colonialism, as a justification to censor and control the Internet from the coercive, sometimes wholly unconscious force of American imperialism, is ideologically bankrupt and self-defeating in the digital age. As noted by Rushkoff, "The Internet doesn't promote imperialism - it eradicates it...(On the Internet) (g)ood ideas spread, bad ones fade away. No one is in charge to arbitrate. Control is lost, and culture reverts back (or, as I see it, evolves forward) into a natural, unchecked collective expression."

As a post-modern tool of functional anarchy, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, the Internet, if allowed to flower in its full power, is highly organized, navigable and empowering. Asian governments can seize on this new media to move towards establishing a truly equitable presence in the imagined global community, providing the netizens of the world with an alternative reading of events other than the dominant.

However, it is a foregone conclusion that the re-reading of Asia in all its splendor and developments cannot be achieved if there exist obstacles to providing access for these alternative perspectives to be expressed. In the days of the NWIO movement, obstacles were in the form of economics, communication infrastructure, and political will understood along the classic

theories of development, dependence and dominance. Following the meteoric rise of the region's economic base and political liberalisation in the past decade, □□ the only obvious hindrance to realizing the objectives proposed in the dogged days of the NWIO is from within. As such, no matter how convincing Asian governments justify their attempts to regulate the Internet within its 'cybercolonialism' paradigm, the fact remains that unless they avoid the desire to place road blocks on the information highway, the status quo of the NWIO discourse continues.

By ensuring that the digital information pipes are free of intervention, governments could focus their energies in championing a re-reading of issues, concerns and ideals for all to see and tell. While the American content continues to dominate the trends and practices along the information highway, Asian countries can adopt an Asian-centered media perspective □□as a more relevant and viable alternative to reading the world. Briefly, the premise for this non-hegemonic, non anti-West perspective is based on the discourse that Asians can no longer accept the roles assigned to them in a play scripted in the historical centers of power. They must now be able to write their own scripts, be responsible for their own image, and ensure that they are heard.

We will briefly look at how Malaysia, a country with a history of strict media regulations but thick in the push for a more visible and vocal Asian representation in the global arena, is using the Internet as its instrument for local and regional empowerment.

Checking the "Sulit" Mentality at the Doorstep of Cyberjaya

Malaysia has impressed the West of its relative affluence and economic performance over recent years. In its aim to leapfrog into a knowledge (information) society by the year 2000, the government has reinforced the notion of corporatist nationalism in its pragmatic approach to the digital communication industry vis-a-vis its conceptualisation of a Multimedia Super Corridor.

Its expansive infrastructure and capital investments aside, central to the MSC operative ideology is the unfettered borderless engagement as opposed to containment of ideas and contexts. This is a radical break away from the rigid power hierarchies prevalent in the governance and social interaction of Malaysians in general. Whether the Internet will actually lead to a more organic system of transparency in the formulation of public policies and encouragement of pluralistic public discourse remains a matter of academic conjecture.

While there is as yet no explicit public affirmation of the intellectual traditions of Western liberal pluralism, opinion leaders such as Anwar Ibrahim has pushed for a revival of an Asiatic discourse embracing Oriental and Occidental intellectual and philosophical traditions. As he underscores in his book "Asian Renaissance", only when the mind and intellect is freed of internal insecurity and relatively independent of external constraints can the cultural and intellectual reawakening of Asia begin to evolve.

As recent comers to the Internet, Malaysians (and those who have migrated or currently studying overseas, particularly in Australia and the United States) have recently had a taste of this intellectual revival through easier and cost effective access to pluralistic discourse through the Internet. National politics and its related taboo topics such as race, religion, class and gender are increasingly becoming less constrained by fear of political intimidation. Web sites such as "www.malaysia.net" administered from Sydney now provide a forum for Malaysians (students, academics, NGOs, journalists and business people) to voice their "Malaysian" views on local and international issues.

Here lies the potential for Malaysians, especially the educated middle class to break away from the essentialist notion of national culture, politics and identity based on narrow absolutist ethnic and cultural differentiation. However, in the short term, the narrow profile of Internet users concentrated on the educated English-speaking middle class (as access to the Internetting community is a function of one's English language literacy) may not sufficiently catalyse a global re-orientation of Malaysians in general. Scenarios of how the Internet will revolutionize public discourse and learning environment in Malaysia in the long term are still a matter of polarised conjectures between imagined multimedia utopias and anticipated widening of the gaps between the information rich and the information poor.

Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir's vision for the Year 2020 is the creation of a civil society (Masyarakat Madani) where every member of society must be enabled to attain his or her potential – economically, politically, culturally, and spiritually. The learning environment for this civil society, supported by new information technology, is envisaged to be one that is "self-regulating and empowered through the force of knowledge, skills and values inculcated within the people". Here lies the channeling powers of the Internet and its significance to political and social change in Malaysia.

Between 1991 and 1995, according to news reports, Malaysian universities had churned out 7,479 graduates in computer science, multimedia and information technology. The government plans to have another 15,000 information technology graduates in the workforce by the year 2000. Civil servants have also been placed on re-training schemes to prepare for a 'paperless'

government. In late 1996 several "smart schools" were designated to apply information technology throughout its curriculum and instruction methodology.

While the statistics may be impressive, the cultural snag is that the bureaucracy, academic ethos and discursive environment in the country is still shrouded by a 'silit' (secrecy) syndrome in the public attitude towards information sharing and knowledge generation. Communication behavior and cognitive skills right from within the family environment to the schools, community and government were built on a tradition of respect for authority. With the vertical communication structure and culture in both the academia and government, charting an open path towards a "civil society" remains crucial. □

While the Internet may not necessarily be the only specialised influential information network system in Malaysia, its short history as a great facilitator of local and global communication makes it unique to the government's attempt to create a wired civil society. However, as mentioned, there is little indication that the pedagogic and philosophical direction of the education system has undergone a parallel change. The didactics in the Malaysian education system (likewise for most Asian countries), a legacy left by British colonial rule, remain as rigid and pedantic as ever which is an antithesis to the open, chaotic and critical orientation of the Internet culture. □□□

At the frontline in shaping a civil society are educators. Their professional development is unquestionably crucial in determining how well Malaysians can learn the "values" of a civil (Asian) society □□□á within the current "authoritarian" pedagogy being practised in schools, and accepted by parents and pupils as "teacher knows best". □□□Leapfrogging into the Internet age without the structural and cultural transformations in governance and open public communication could pave the way for succumbing to a 'cyber-colonialism' rather than realising an Asian renaissance.

□□□

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that while the present state of the Internet appears strikingly Western (or American), it was to a degree unintended by the originators of the medium. Just as the West do not claim monopoly of the Internet, Asian nations should refrain from applying this premise to regulate the public's access to the information highway. Instead, these nations should work towards freeing up the Internet in their societies so as to encourage a renaissance of their cultural identity and values in cyberspace.

The use of the Internet is pertinent to transformation, rather than deterioration, of cultural identity and values of marginalized nations as it fosters the promotion of alternative perspectives - which are crucial to rid countries of □□

their colonial baggage, reduce the global community's dependency on a dominant perspective, and lessen the inherent hegemony of privately owned media systems.

It is true that embracing the Internet is risky as the technology is still in its infancy; but it must be asserted that avoidance or control of it (Internet) will only give the existing privately-owned and highly biased global media empires no incentive to change and provide a version of reality that is no different since the early days of colonial repression. The forces of globalisation unleashed by the Internet have bolted. Harping on the 'neo-colonialism' line is politically popular but self-defeating.

With the Internet and its web of computer networks, Asian nations can now harness this new medium as a political tool to go forward and actively apply their narratives and stories to more and different kinds of communities. If information is the most precious commodity for economic growth and political reforms, then the Internet will prove to be the most valuable low cost medium for developing countries for them to 'exploit' the endless supply of research data and ideas placed in the cyberspace by the industrialised nations. It is really up to governments and citizens to redefine their goals in cyberspace.

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Enhancing Citizenship Skills In The Information Age

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