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Cybercolonialism and Communication Education:
Promotional vs. Educational Uses of the Net in Mainland Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This paper will examine two related dimensions of the use of the Net in higher education in mainland Southeast Asia. First, it will discuss the Net in a global setting concerning the philosophical and historical implications of the uses of IT (information technology) in higher education. Second, the paper will consider the regulation of Net use regionally in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore regarding public access to and official control of the Net.

There is a conflict between different interest groups supporting either the promotional or educational uses of the Net. On the one hand, there is a barrage of promotional stories and advertising about IT in the media, often funded or sourced by multinational IT companies or their local distributors. This fosters a pro-corporatist climate towards IT generally and the Net specifically. Universities are seen as quasi-business organisations in much of this discourse, while its assumption is that the expanded use of IT and the Net will automatically improve university teaching and learning. It is in this sense that this paper uses the term ‘cybercolonialism’ to mark this as a dilemma for communication educators.

Conference Topic? Either 'Internet in Asia OR Com. Education and Training
Cybercolonialism and Communication Education:
Promotional vs. Educational Uses of the Net in Mainland Southeast Asia

Glen Lewis, Professor, Graduate School, MACA Program, Bangkok University.

This paper will examine two related dimensions of the use of the Net in higher education in mainland Southeast Asia. First, it will discuss the Net in a global setting concerning the philosophical and historical implications of the uses of IT (information technology) in higher education. Second, the paper will consider the regulation of Net use regionally in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore regarding public access to and official control of the Net. Although it would be useful to also consider some of the more positive uses of the Net in university communication research and teaching (e.g., Gunaratne & Lee, 1996) that is beyond the limits of this paper.

My argument is that there is a conflict between different interest groups supporting either the promotional or educational uses of the Net. On the one hand, there is a barrage of promotional stories and advertising about IT in the media, often funded or sourced by multinational IT companies or their local distributors. This fosters a euphoric, pro-corporatist climate towards IT generally and the Net specifically. Universities are seen as quasi-business organisations in much of this discourse, while its assumption is that the expanded use of IT and the Net will automatically improve university teaching and learning. It is in this sense that this paper uses the term 'cybercolonialism' to mark this as a dilemma for communication educators.

Although the Cold War is over, there remains a division between the proponents of a free market, US-style corporatism as a desirable model of social organisation and their critics. The former usually equate open telecommunications and financial markets as the best recipes for international competitiveness (Venturelli, 1997). On the other hand, a range of alternative public interest associations, including educators, unions, women's and environmental groups, look askance at the social impact of IT. They do this either in many Western countries where demonstrably high levels of structural unemployment remain, despite the American economy's recent growth, or in non-Western nations where their concerns may also include the culturally damaging impacts of software, TV programs, adversarial journalism or Net content on local societies (Yeap, 1994).

This scenario of a corporate model of Net use against a public interest one, however, is itself too dichotomous and simplistic. First, when the Net is considered in an Asian context, there is as much of a challenge to its free use by the stronger tradition of government media regulation as by private monopoly control. Second, even in the US, the bastion of free market ideology, there are many significant public interest and educational applications of the Net and of IT. This paper aims to unpack some of these complications and argue for a critical appraisal of the use of the Net both in the West and in Southeast Asia.

I. Some Global Myths of Information Revisited

Kathleen Woodward's 1980 book used the phrase 'The Myths of Information' as its title to make an historical analysis of the uses of communications technology. Despite hers and others critical views (e.g., Mowlana, 1997), however, the entry into the public domain of the Net in the last decade has seen the recycling of many of the cliches about IT that preceded the Net. The one most relevant to this paper is the claim that the Net will replace face-to-face teaching in schools and universities, possibly through projects such as the MIT Media Services Lab (Rogers, 1997). Despite the elements of exaggeration in this argument, it is being taken seriously enough in Australia, for instance, for the government to have recently funded a large research project into remote-delivery university Net services. Just as the advent of film, radio and television, then PCs, promoted a surge of exaggerated claims that these technologies would replace face-to-face teaching, now the same claim is being made about the Net.

Yet there is a lack of any historical perspective in such claims. There are also theorists, such as Poster (1994) in the US or Baudrillad (1985) in France, who have argued that the conditions of postmodern societies make attempts to apply an historical perspective to new technologies irrelevant. This section will take issue with this and several other 'myths of information', to argue that one of the first things
that university teachers and students need to know about the Net is not just how to use it practically, but how to think about it conceptually. To do this, the philosophical and historical context of the Net needs considering, though not necessarily in the terms of Eurocentric postmodern social theory. Two main points will be made. First, there is a genuine difficulty in historically understanding the Net’s use in public communication. Second, the role of the Net in universities needs to be seen in educational, not promotional terms.

L. Does the Net have a Memory?

The first point concerns the a-historical way in which the Net is being treated as a communications medium. Here, one of the strongest critiques of the problems of contemporary Western universities has been recently made by a Canadian writer John Ralston Saul (1995). His book, which is also an essay on the origins of democracy in the West, argues that modern societies are trapped in a form of corporate specialisation that diminishes the notion of the public interest. Saul daringly claims that management schools should have no place in universities, which are failing in their traditional role of defending the humanist mission of critical inquiry. He argues that there is a glut of received wisdom about the virtues of free markets and the worship of technology, as well as about globalization, that reduces the public’s capacity to make rational decisions. This results in what he calls ‘The Unconscious Civilisation’.

Saul is equally sceptical about the introduction of communications technology into schools. “Essentially”, he writes, “a new high-level course in typing is being presented as if it were fundamental education” (1995: 142). I believe his point is not over-stated. Saul’s critique of Western (and world) society comes from a tradition of critical Canadian scholarship that has produced some of the most original studies of American communications dominance, such as by Harold Innis (1950) and Dallas Smythe (1981). Unlike Smythe, Saul is not a Marxist; but also unlike another Canadian, Marshall McLuhan (1964), Saul is the opposite of being a techno-booster.

Another historical point is worth making about the over-promotion of the Net. The current enthusiasm for having personal Net home pages is similar to what happened in the early days of radio, when boys and young men delighted in building simple receivers (called ‘crystal sets’). Historical analyses of broadcasting in Europe, the US and Australia suggest a similar response of wide public enthusiasm on an individual basis for a technology that had the capacity to be a two-way communications medium, that was relatively inexpensive, and originally was not dominated by government or corporate interests. These are precisely the features current champions of the Net, such as Rheingold (1993) and others argue for.

That at least was the story in radio’s first decade in the 1920s. By the 1940s private interests in the US and government networks in Europe had relegated the hopes of these early amateurs and some educators for a free, public communications system to the margins. Today there remains only a subculture of CB’ers, usually long-distance truck drivers, who use radio in the way enthusiasts originally predicted (McChesney, 1996; Osborne & Lewis, 1995). This of course is not the same history that radio had in many non-Western states, such as Thailand. There its later development in a less democratic climate usually meant government ownership and strict control of broadcasting (Ubonrat, 1992).

A final historical point also needs making about the communication research tradition in many Asian universities that influences how IT and the Net are being taught about. Communication programs in most East Asian states tend to be based on US models; many staff have US postgraduate degrees, and courses taught rely heavily on American textbooks and theories, which are mostly functionalist and use quantitative methods. However the dominance of US development communication models in the university curriculum of many Asian states, such as in the Philippines and Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s especially (Rosario-Braid, 1992), has given way to an emphasis on marketing, advertising and public relations. This reflected the needs of the rapidly expanding East Asian economies - especially Thailand’s boom in the 1980s (Pasuk & Baker, 1996) - for graduates with applied communication research skills (Suwipa, 1993; Servaes, 1990).
What has remained constant, however, is the emphasis on a functionalist, applied research tradition, that often pays only lip-service to theory and is indifferent to its own reflexive position as scholarship or to its mostly non-democratic political implications. This is especially the case in the more authoritarian East Asian states such as Singapore. There, despite producing a sophisticated body of communication research, communications scholarship remains firmly within government guidelines (e.g., Kuo, 1993) with some notable exceptions (Huat, 1996).

The implications of this for Asian university teaching is that students will learn about the Net mainly with business uses in mind. Yet this need not necessarily be so. The spectacular end of the ‘Asian economic miracle’, and subsequent calls for national self-sufficiency, notably by Thailand’s King Bumiphol in his December, 1997 birthday speech (BP 5 Dec 97), or by the Thai social critic Thirayut Boonmee (N 10 Jan 97) may encourage a return to the more socially conscious aims of earlier development communication research. New communication technologies, such as the Net or digital satellite radio, could still benefit rural and poorer communities in Southeast Asia.

Lii: Is the Net a public information resource or a promotional tool?

The second major global ‘myth of information’ I want to contest concerns the social utility of the Net. A key myth here is that of the McLuhanite ‘global village’ where new cyber-communities will help free speech proliferate (Rheingold, 1993). Unfortunately, the real tendency in the Net’s international development is to follow the US commercial model. Just as international telecommunications policy is mostly guided by US concerns to open global markets through WTO agreements, such as the ITA (Information Technology Agreement) in Singapore in December, 1996, the US model of commercial Net development is also being advocated. Related to this is a fundamental question of cultural hegemony concerning the dominance of English as the primary Net language.

In debating what the purpose of the Net should be in international public communication, we are also making assumptions about the nature of the wider public sphere. However what is the nature of international public communication in an age of communication satellites, e-mail and the Net, where national boundaries are electronically short-circuited? How do we evaluate public information on the Net in terms of truth and falsity? If I libel a citizen of a foreign country on my home page am I open to prosecution under my country’s laws or hers? In particular, how does the language of the media impact on public communication about the Net and IT?

The dilemma here relates to many wider debates about the meaning of public language and the public sphere in contemporary society (van Dijk, 1995). In these discussions, communication studies is of course only a relatively small field of social inquiry. Further, as well as traditional divisions between the social sciences and the humanities about how language functions, the last decade has also seen a groundswell of postmodern perspectives challenging earlier approaches to how language is used in constructing public meaning (Fornas, 1995; Jameson, 1984). Here, for the sake of brevity, I will only restate John Saul’s main theme concerning language.

Saul maintains that language has been split into two parts - public language “enormous, rich, varied and more or less powerless”, and corporatist language “attached to power and action” (1995: 48). He distinguishes three types of corporatist language - rhetoric, propaganda and dialects. By dialects he means the specialized terms of various corporate interest groups - the social sciences, medicine, science, linguistics and arts (1995: 49). In Saul’s terms, much of the public talk about the Net uses a dialect - special terms proliferate, such as ISP’s (information service providers), URL’s (uniform resource locators), splash page (the first page of a Net site), IRC (Internet Relay Chat), HTML (hypertext markup language) and push technology (personally tailored information services). A good deal of talk about the Net therefore is tech-talk, with a male gender bias (Turkle, 1984). It is a dialect that serves as shorthand to communicate the technical features of the Net. This tendency derives from the jargon that proliferates in talk about IT, PC’s and telecommunications.

To the extent that Saul’s classification draws attention to the problem of what an effective public language might be, it is helpful. He correctly identifies one of the major communication problems in contemporary society: a split between a public language and the specialist languages used by corporatist interests. The latter include communication scholars, whether they identify with social
science approaches or with discourse analysis (Crowley & Mitchell, 1995). Yet where Saul is less satisfactory is in explaining what he means by 'public language' and why he believes it is powerless. Here his analysis does not consider the role of the media, unlike the approach taken by other Canadian social theorists, such as McLuhan (1964) or more recently the work of Arthur and Louise Kroker (1994), whose e-journal ‘C-Theory’ engages in a postmodern analysis of media and culture.

The mass media actually has a culturally central role in publicising new IT and the Net. Most major newspapers now have weekly supplements dedicated to IT, the Net, PC’s and telecommunications. In Bangkok, both English-language dailies have these (The Nation’s ‘Byetline’ and the Bangkok Post’s ‘Database’), in Australia The Weekend Australian has ‘Syte’, while even prestigious international news magazines, such as The Economist and the Financial Times, carry similar supplements. Singapore and Malaysia have their own equivalents, while of course the US and Canadian print media do as well, with some of the world’s most elaborate Web news and business magazine sites promoting IT and the Net (e.g., Forbes http://www.forbes.com/).

In fact, the role of the mass news media is pivotal in the circulation of a public language. Unlike Saul, I consider that the news coverage of IT and the Net is linked to action and power, especially to that of promotion. The last ten years, especially in Asia with its tremendous economic boom until mid-1997, saw a great expansion in newspapers and magazines and in broadcasting. Many of these new papers were centrally concerned with business. The Thai exemplar was the M Group, owned by media impresario Sondhi Limongthkul. His success with Phujadkarn in the mid-1980s led to the creation of a new English-language daily Asia Times and the monthly Asia Inc. in the 1990s (Lewis, 1997). The expansion of the Asian media, in other words, was linked to the growth of business journalism. This was not unique to Asia, as there had been an earlier expansion in business journalism in the US, Europe and Australia. What was perhaps different in the Southeast Asian context was that professional news values were not as well established prior to the 1990s expansion of the print media.

My point here is more basic than Saul’s. There is a public language, yet it mostly consists of media discourse, which increasingly relies on the language of business journalism. This includes the US global TV news channels, notably CNN, which have business as one of their primary frames of reference in assessing news stories. This encourages a style of promotional public discourse, where everything is assessed in terms of costs and benefits and share prices. Journalism about the Net, both in the press as well as in American TV programs about the Net, treats it in promotional terms. The major issues are seen as the reliability of introducing secure credit-card or cyber-cash methods of payment, and the dangers to national security or personal bank accounts of computer hackers. Accordingly, communication students learning about the Net are most interested in how it can be used in advertising, marketing or public relations.

So although Saul seems correct in claiming that there is a present crisis in public communication, I prefer to diagnose that malaise instead in Habermas’s terms of the decline of the public sphere in Western society. Admittedly, Habermas tended to over-rationalise the nature of public communication (Thompson, 1990). Yet the ideal of rational public communication is one that cannot be dispensed with - that is, unless we want to also jettison the ideals of public education and the public interest which, as Saul so lucidly shows, underpin democratic citizenship.

Some parallels between early radio broadcasting and the Net were made earlier. A similar process is underway today, as a division is emerging between Net use for personal pleasure (e.g., in the tools available for building home pages via the Geocities and Tripod sites) and the commercialisation of Net sites either for the promotion of hotel chains, or for building the public images of large government agencies and private corporations. On-line newspaper companies, such as the New York Times, the LA Times or the Straits Times in Singapore, are now charging for non-current information services. Similar trends towards user-pays services have perplexed the library profession for some time (Pavlik, 1996: 324). Now many important databases, such as Lexis/Nexis, can only be accessed through universities or large corporations and require user fees. This has serious implications for the future of the Net in scholarly research. It is an important new research tool, so its educational role should not be limited either by business interests or by the cyber-hype in the mass media.
I. iii: What Language does the Net Speak?

Because of the Net’s US origins and the leading role Americans play in its development, the language of the Net currently is American English. Other factors contribute to this outcome. English is also the primary language of international business and of science and technology. As the Net is a new technology and one of its primary aims is commerce, it acts as an important vehicle for increasing the international role of the English language. In Asia, there is only one serious alternative to the use of English as a Net language and that is modern, or simplified Chinese. Despite the high levels of Net technology in Japan, e.g., with the WIDE project, or the provision of an alternative Asian Net backbone connecting Asia through Japan rather than the US, the Japanese language is used by only a relatively small number of East Asians compared to modern Chinese.

Yet there are factors that both favor and constrain the use of Chinese as a long-term alternative to English as a Net language. In mainland China the Net is being kept under relatively tight political control. The encouragement of Chinese language sites is partly a result of government policy meant to encourage PRC Net users to stay away from foreign English-language sites considered undesirable. As of December, 1997 there were a reported 500 000 Net subscribers in China - although any figures about Net use in Asia are unreliable and verge on exaggeration (internet.news.com, Dec. 97).

Another factor favoring the growth of Chinese language sites is that in the PRC especially, and also to some degree in Taiwan, English is not widely used or understood in daily life. The overseas Chinese locations where English and Chinese are both important are Singapore and Hong Kong, both ex-British colonial territories. Singapore has an edge over Hong Kong, due to its long-standing ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign that has resulted in the more uniform use of spoken Mandarin in Singapore, as against Cantonese in Hong Kong. Although the written characters are accessible to speakers of both Chinese dialects, Singapore’s level of English language literacy is greater than Hong Kong’s and Singaporeans are more likely to be competently bi-lingual. Further, Taiwanese written Chinese retains the characters of classical Chinese and therefore makes its Net sites less accessible to the many Chinese who are more familiar with the simplified script.

Several recent developments in Net technologies also suggest that the use of modern Chinese may provide at least an important supplement to English-language sites. At the second China Wide Web convention in Beijing in December, 1997 the US Netscape company unveiled a Chinese-language version of its ‘Netscape Communicator’ browser, developed with the China Internet Corporation (HK Standard Dec 11, 1997 internet.news.com). Similarly, the US-based Alta Vista search engine owned by DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation) recently announced a a multilingual search capability that was developed jointly with the Singapore Information Technology Institute. This will be able to read traditional and simplified Chinese, as well as locate and search Japanese and Korean-language web pages (IT Focus, in AMCB Nov-Dec 1997: 5).

Even if many Chinese language Net sites are created in future, this still poses problems for smaller nations such as Thailand and Malaysia, which both have significant Chinese-language minorities. However due to historical circumstances, their position is radically different. After earlier times when the Chinese were discriminated against in Thailand (Hewison, 1996), there is now a much greater integration of Sino-Thais into Thai society. In both countries, citizens of Chinese descent have been extremely commercially successful, despite Malaysia’s discriminatory policy of promoting Bumiputera (native Malay) business. The very success of the integration of the Chinese in Thailand, however, has diminished their cultural visibility. For instance, there are several Chinese-language newspaper Net sites in Malaysia but none in Thailand.

Otherwise, the dominant languages are Central Thai in Thailand and Bahasa Malay in Malaysia. However written or spoken Thai has no overseas language linkages, apart from its relatively small diaspora of overseas Thais in North America, the Middle East, Europe and Australia, as well as its traditional ties with Laos. For Malaysia, the principal external language link is with Indonesia, with which its has both the Islamic religion and Bahasa Indonesian/Malay in common. A further complication for Malaysia is its some 10% minority Indian population, mostly Tamils. Currently there is one Tamil-language newspaper on the Malaysian Web (the Dinamani Tamil Daily http://www.dinamani.com/).
What are the implications of this language scenario for the future development of the Net in the three mainland Southeast Asian states? Most clearly, that Singapore is best placed to benefit from its high levels of bi-lingual literacy in English and Chinese. In November, 1997 the Ministry of Information and the Arts discussed joint development of the Net with the PRC. Minister of Information, George Yeo, said: “We must encourage young Singaporeans...to access the Chinese language Internet so that when they grow up, they will be as fluent in the Chinese Internet as they are in the English Internet” (ST 18 Nov 97). Second, that Malaysia could also benefit from that combination as well, except that domestic political factors inhibit the promotion of Chinese-Malaysian cultural influence.

Thailand has the most serious long-term language problem in benefitting from the Net as an international communications medium. Chinese is not taught in Thai public schools, while Thai English-language abilities remain poorly developed. Despite the long-term presence of an English language press in Bangkok (the Bangkok Post dates from the 1940s), and despite the significant numbers of elite Thais who are competent English-speakers, English is only superficially understood by ordinary Thai people. Most Thai scholars rarely feel comfortable either publishing or speaking publicly in English, with some notable exceptions. This problem of limited English-language skills constraining the Net’s development in Thailand has been acknowledged by a number of communications executives and journalists (e.g., Loxinfo President Vivatong Vichit-vadakan: “We should not fool ourselves that we can get by with only local content on the Internet in Thai, BP, Dec. 96: Viewpoints, End of Year IT Review).

II. Public Access and Official Control of the Net in Mainland Southeast Asia

Public access to the Net and the terms of its official control are the issues at the heart of understanding the development of the Net in mainland Southeast Asia. This section will outline some of the communications ecology in the three countries concerned. A common problem they share, however, is that there are major external constraints due to the primacy of US, Europe and Japan in the international growth of the Net. The Net’s history began in the US in 1969, with the Defense Department’s ARPANet, the first national computer network; in 1989, the World Wide Web was created at CERN, in Switzerland. Then in 1993 the Clinton administration called for the creation of an Information Superhighway via the NII (National Information Initiative) and the GII (Global Information Initiative). These calls were taken up by the G-7 group which has since developed major IT plans involving Europe, Canada and Japan (Pavlīk, 1996: 48).

US telephone companies, multimedia providers, computer companies and cable-TV groups are now locked in a dynamic contest to see who will take the lion’s share of the new IT and Net business. The most publicised aspect of this is the rivalry between Microsoft’s Internet Explorer and Netscape, Bill Gates’ contest with Sun-Java for HDTV applications, and the US Justice Department’s suit against Microsoft for anti-competitive practices. Microsoft, Web-TV and Sony and Philips are meantime promoting WebTV, where TV set-top boxes will be able to switch between broadcast TV and the Net. The charge is US$19.95 per month. A smaller competitor, Curtis Mathes’ Xpressway’s can also send fax’s and use the TV set as a telephone speaker (ABCNews.com, 7 Aug 97).

European and Japanese companies are also active. JSAT, Nomura and Sony will launch a faster satellite-delivered Net service in Japan in 1998, though it will cost US$83 per month. By December, 1997 four Japanese companies were providing data communications services via satellite, led by Direct Internet Corp. (Biztech 11 June 97; 5 Nov 97). Meanwhile, America Online joined with Bertelsmann AG to launch Europe Online in 1995. The company also has Japanese and Canadian operations and in November, 1997 announced the 1998 beginning of AOL, Australia Online (Biztech 6 Nov 97). Australia has the largest IT market in the Asia-Pacific outside of Japan.

In other words, the development of the Net took place in North America, then in Japan and Europe. The newest technologies and the largest strategic business alliances in IT are in those countries. Therefore the ability of smaller states, such as Singapore, to develop the Net is bounded by these external constraints. Nevertheless, each country has its own national autonomy, and it is essential to consider how the Net is being adapted in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. The basic issues are first, how wide is public Net access, and second, how is the Net officially controlled?
Singapore

Singapore has a clear lead over its neighbours in IT and its Net services. Some 250,000 to 280,000 Singaporeans have Net connections, as against 250,000 in Malaysia and perhaps 170,000 in Thailand. In any country, the Net should not be seen in isolation from the wider national IT infrastructure. Singapore has no communication satellites, yet its telephone and pager services are highly developed, and PC penetration is the highest of the three countries. Singapore remains the clear IT leader in Southeast Asia. It is the favorite location in Southeast Asia for multinational executives. For example, NBC and Dow Jones recently decided to establish their Asian base for CNBC television and Net services in Singapore, though this means an end to the earlier ABN Singapore business TV service, broadcast since 1993 (BP 10 Dec 97).

Singapore’s major current IT project is Singapore ONE (‘One Network for Everyone’), launched in June, 1997. This will extend its already sophisticated electronic networks further into the city’s daily life. It will link a high-speed fibre-optic network to the city’s telephones, TV sets and PCs. Beginning with a trial of 400 homes, by end of 1998 it should have networked all 800,000 households (AT 10 Jun 97; ST 10 Jun 97). Although the network is a test-bed for commercial applications aimed at domestic consumer markets, Singapore emphasises the educational applications of its IT services. Schools have been guaranteed S$30,000 each for software and are well equipped with PCs and Net connections (BT 26 Sep 97).

Yet Singapore retains the toughest controls on the uses of IT of the three countries. Cable-TV has been operated by Singapore Cable Vision since 1995 as an alternative to Direct Satellite Broadcast TV and private satellite dish ownership remains prohibited. Similar controls are in place on Internet services, with the number of ISPs being limited to three - SingNet (Singapore Telecom), Pacific Internet (Sembawang Media), and CyberWay Singapore Press Holdings). For 1996, their subscriber numbers were 100,000, 85,000 and 45,000 respectively (ST 21 Sep 97).

A National Internet Advisory Committee has determined categories of objectionable sites since August, 1996 - e.g., pornography, violence, promotion of ethnic and religious intolerance, and promotion of criminal offences. Since September, 1996 there has been a local site for the police, the National Registration Department and the Immigration Department which invites the public to report crime. The site included pictures of the top ten wanted criminals (ST 3 Sep 96; NBP 3 May 96). The Committee emphasises the need to protect school-children from Net pornography and violence, yet the NIAC’s first Annual Report claimed its regulations had not hindered the Net’s growth (ST 26 Sep 97). The rules are administered by the Singapore Broadcasting Authority.

The convergence of Singapore’s controls over the Net with newspaper publishing is exemplified in its technically sophisticated Asia One web site. This includes the Straits Times, as well as other dailies and links to the Nikkei press group in Japan. The Times stories from the previous week are publicly available, yet users wanting more information are required to subscribe and pay for searches. Singapore thus has a system of controls over its version of the Net which gives the public wide, but selective access. Strict control of the print media, broadcasting and the Net is consistent with its national ideology of corporate technocracy (Huat, 1996; Birch, 1993) and is defended in these terms by Singaporean communication researchers (e.g., Ang & Nadarajan, 1996).

Malaysia

Though Malaysia’s IT development lags behind Singapore’s it remains a centre-piece in the government’s promotion of modernisation. By the late 1980s, electronics were 44% of manufactures and Malaysia was the world’s largest exporter of semiconductors (Kahn, 1996: 59). In 1996 the Net, however, took second place to the Multimedia Supercorridor (MSC). Coming after the completion of the world’s tallest office buildings in KL, the Petronas Towers, and the launch of its two satellites (MEASAT’s) in 1996, the MSC aims to foster a visionary range of electronic services, including 22 TV and 8 radio channels from ASTRO (All Asia TV & Radio Coy) (UE: 9 Oct 96). In addition, the Kuala Lumpur City Centre will be connected to the MEASAT system to provide ISDN, digital trunks, leased lines, frame relay, video conferencing, and VSAT services (UE: 3 Apr 97).
economic crisis has slowed the MSC’s development, yet the government is proceeding with its plans and is busy choosing foreign and local companies from a list of 150 applicants to be the MSC core businesses. A communications convergence law is also currently being drafted.

This will be the real test of how Malaysia will regulate the Net. Earlier in March 1996, before the economic crisis, Dr Tengku Shariffdeen, the Director of MIMOS, the government agency which coordinates national Net and IT policies, said that Malaysia was fixed on the idea that there should be no censorship. He said the Net was “an instrument for democratizing societies...we would like to show that, by example in a country like Malaysia, we would like people to participate in governance - the transparency of government” (NBP 28 Mar 96). The Malaysian press has shared in the trend to promote popular enthusiasm for the Net. For instance, Dr Zoraini Wati Abas, an Education Professor at the University of Malaya, writes a weekly column for the New Straits Times. She urges Malaysians to ‘ride the IT wave’. In early 1997, she coaxed her readers to volunteer as guides for the upcoming KLINET conference in June, and the 1998 Commonwealth Games. Her column expresses a mostly uncritical enthusiasm for the Net, rarely mentions censorship, and makes extravagant claims, such as there being 500 000 Malaysians on the Net (NST Computimes, 27 Feb 1997).

Yet there is a genuine seriousness about how Malaysians want to see the Net used educationally and that it should be in accordance with the Islamic faith. Seminars have been held about “Islam and Information Society” by Ikim, the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia. In accord with Dr Mahathir’s views, this symposium criticised the dominance of Western IT hegemony, urging that the Net and the MSC should be pursued in a Malaysian Islamic way, as “the quest for knowledge...is an essential tenet of Islamic teaching” (NST 8 Jan 98). In practice, the Net in Malaysia seems as closely regulated as Singapore’s. There are only two ISP’s: Telekom Malaysia’s TMNet and JARJING (Joint Advanced Research Integrated Networking), the latter being a part of MIMOS. Energy, Telecom and Posts Minister Leo Moggie said in early 1998 that it was government policy to approve only a few ISP’s so as to introduce the Net “in a controlled manner” (NST 8 Jan 98).

The same philosophy guided the government’s earlier qualified approval of direct satellite TV services through the ASTRO system. At the time of the second MEASAT launch, the Minister for Information, Mohamad Rahmid, said: ‘Inevitably, we will open our sky, but just a little, with the use of a specific dish approved by the Ministry’ (UE 25 Sep 96). Previously satellite dish ownership was banned outright, as in Singapore. With the new MEASAT, however, citizens were permitted to own dishes that could receive only those broadcasts (Sinclair, 1997).

The parliament is now drafting a Convergence Bill to regulate telecoms, broadcasting and computing services, and set guidelines for licensing multimedia (Star 21 Oct 1997). Potential international investors in the MSC have been promised no Net censorship, yet it remains to be seen if this will be extended to the rest of the country (EBN 27 Jan 97). One American press report claims that the draft laws are sweeping and carry heavier penalties than comparable US legislation (Mercury Centre, 11 Dec 97). Also, the crisis atmosphere in Malaysia after mid-1997, with the economic crash and the Indonesian fires, have reduced the likelihood of the Net being given free rein. In early November, 1997 the government banned Malaysian academics from speaking out on the haze problem (ST 7 Nov 97), and in the wave of anti-foreign sentiment promoted by Dr Mahathir’s complaints about international financiers, in December, 1997 the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism appointed a committee to screen every foreign report about Malaysia on the Net (BP 3 Dec 97).

Thailand

The Net has developed in a different political atmosphere in Thailand, especially since the more liberal first Chuan government in 1992. Although Thai radio broadcasting remains closely linked with the military and the government Public Relations Department, while Thai TV is also at times monitored and censored, the Thai press is relatively unfettered compared to Malaysia and Singapore. These factors and the country’s economic boom should have stimulated the free growth of the Net in Thailand. Yet the shortcomings in the basic telephone system, together with territorial rivalry between the public and private sectors in service provision, and Thai limitations in using English, has resulted in a slow rate of Net connections. On the more positive side, Thailand has six on-line newspapers, including the English-language Bangkok Post, the Nation and Business Day, as well as three Thai-
language titles, Krungthep Turakij, PhuChatkarn and Thanettakij. There are also some thirty Thai universities with Net home pages, as against Malaysia’s eleven. There is some current disillusionment, nevertheless, about it being any more than an entertainment medium: a survey of 100 Net users showed it had been inefficiently applied among only a small number (BP 16 Dec 97).

The first major service in Thailand was the ThaiSarn academic network, created by cooperation between NECTEC (the National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre) and some of the leading universities in 1992 (Thaweesak, 1998). Early Net links were created with Australian, US and Japanese technical assistance. The first commercial service in March, 1995 was Internet Thailand (ITSC), jointly launched by NECTEC, the CAT (Communications Authority of Thailand) and TOT (Telephone Organisation of Thailand). KSC Comnet began in June, 1995, and the third commercial provider was Loxley’s Loxinfo. Currently, there are some 17 ISP’s in Thailand, many more than in Singapore or Malaysia, and though there are no reliable figures on ISP market share, among the biggest providers are ITSC, KSC, Loxley, Samart’s CyberNet and Asia Acess (Waltham, 1998).

Many ISP’s, however, do not necessarily mean quality service. IT industry review comments by a cross-section of Thai Net executives have regularly focussed on limitations to the Net’s growth caused by high telecommunications charges and the division of administrative responsibility between CAT and TOT (e.g., Samart’s President Charncchai Charuvastra, and by Somkiat Tangkijvanich of the TDRI - Thailand Development Research Institute, BP 28 Oct 97). The head of NECTEC, Pairash Thajchayapong, also has pointed out that major IT projects in Singapore (‘SingaporeOne’) and Malaysia (the MSC), have created a focus for IT and Net policy that Thailand lacks (N 8 Mar 97).

The background to Thai dissatisfaction here is a concern about the lack of skilled manpower in the IT, science and engineering sectors (BP Dec. 96 Viewpoints), about insufficient investment in R&D which accounts for only some .15% of GDP (BP 6 Sep 96), as well as recent major problems in the electronics industry. The misfortunes of the Alphatec computer group and their subsidiary Submicron Technologies was prominent in IT news in 1997. Alphatec was Thailand’s largest integrated circuit manufacturer, operative since 1988, and its problems were seen as setting back the national microelectronics industry (BP 22 July 97). Another worry for the Thai IT industry was the periodic fights over budget allocations for computers in schools. These were either being downsized due to the recession (BP 8 Aug 97), or affected by charges of corruption about excessive costs for the supply of computers and software programs - especially when Sukhavich Rangsitipol was Education Minister in the Chavalit government (BP 31 Aug 97; N 15 Jan 98, 1).

The most current issue concerning the Net’s development has been the drafting of a special law. There had been US reports, as far back as October 1997, that Thailand was planning to have its own brand of ‘cybercops’ to monitor the Net (NB 16 Oct 97), while in November, 1997 the new communications Minister, Suthep Thueeksaban, admitted asking the USIS (US Information Service) for a copy of the US Internet law (BP 27 Nov 97).The matter then became controversial in January, 1998 when the Bangkok Post sharply criticised the draft law produced by ISOC (Internet Society Thai Chapter). Many of the provisions of the earlier drafts - which were only available in the Thai language on ISOC’s home page - were onerous and restrictive. The first draft of the law was adapted from Singaporean legislation and threatened to place the Net under close regulation, at a time when media freedom is increasing (BP 26 Dec 97 and 7 Jan 98). The ISOC version will now probably not proceed, although public hearings will be held at the end of January, 1998. The problem remains that the new committee monitoring the Net may entrench certain private ISP interests (Emmott, 1998).

Conclusion:

The first part of this paper criticised two prevailing global myths of information about the Net - that it is a completely unprecedented form of technology that is going to make conventional education obsolete (untrue); that the Net is going to create free, virtual communities in international public communication (untrue). The rationale of this critique was linked to John Ralston Saul’s wider argument about the dominance of corporate rationality in the West, in which technology, globalisation and free markets are fetishized, and where the promotional values of business journalism tend to overwhelm the educational and public interest potential of new technologies such as the Net.
In the Southeast Asian setting, however, it was suggested that the main opponents of the use of the Net for purposes of free inquiry, either in university settings or for public interest causes, such as environmental protection and womens and workers rights, are the authoritarian and quasi-democratic political cultures of Singapore and Malaysia. Although the Thai state is more politically liberal, it also has a tradition of media intervention and censorship which could re-emerge in times of national crisis, such as during the present recession. In other words, the interests of American cybercolonialism in promoting the Net purely as a tool of commerce are abetted in the Southeast Asian setting by the role of the state, which wishes to maintain their strict control of public informational space in their own borders, while introducing new technologies such as the Net which are essentially borderless. The aim of this paper has been to critically challenge the legitimacy of both promotional and authoritarian approaches to the use of the Net. In communication and social research programs the Net is likely to have an important supplementary research role to the use of normal print and personal sources. That potential should not be limited by either promotional cyberhype or state censorship.
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