The politics of the Internet and social media in Asia
Mobilization, participation, and retrenchment?

Jason P. Abbott

It is hard to believe that the primary tools and websites that we associate with Internet use today are at most a little more than a decade old. Facebook and Flickr were founded in 2004, and Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube were founded in 2005. China’s social media giant Qzone was founded in 2005, Sina Weibo was founded in 2009, and most recently founded was WeChat in 2011. In this relatively short period of time, social media has become the most visible if not the defining feature of contemporary Internet use. Moreover, tools and applications that were primarily designed to facilitate innocuous communication have become sophisticated tools in social and political movements worldwide. From the Arab Spring protests of 2011 that led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt to the Occupy Wall Street movement of late 2011 or Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement in 2014, social media has been openly utilized to organize and publicize protests, to counter dominant media narratives and propaganda, and to disseminate information both among protestors and with the outside world. Most of the tools we associate with such movements (social networking, microblogging, video sharing, live streaming, etc.) were originally designed to facilitate banal conversations and communication among millennials, and yet these applications have had dramatic social and political consequences.

Perhaps the most transformative effect of the proliferation of such applications is that Internet users have been transformed from passive recipients of information and content to ‘produsers’ [sic] of information and content (Bruns 2009), exemplified most in the rise of citizen journalism. As Zeynap Tufekci (2014) comments, “the advent of blogging and the rise of cheap cell phones with video cameras ... created major changes as activists started acquiring, publishing, and circulating video evidence of the many grievances that made everyday life difficult for citizens” (Tufekci ibid.: 5). Furthermore, since a user can instantly network with hundreds or thousands of friends and followers, their impact can quickly reach a critical mass that can make their message go viral (Konnikova 2014). As the Global Day of Action for Burma on October 6, 2007 demonstrated, a movement could now grow from a handful of people to a global organization in less than a month.
The ubiquity of the modern smartphone means that ordinary people now have the tools to challenge the power of the mainstream media to control the news agenda, ushering in with it a politics of visibility (Yang 2016). Especially in regimes in which censorship and state-controlled narratives have been prevalent, these tools offer a much wider “variety of first hand accounts” (Bruns ibid.: 72) unmediated and uncensored by the editor, the proprietor, or the government. Such accounts enable the emergence of a ‘monitorial citizenship’ able to fact check what is reported, discern omissions, and challenge propaganda. These capabilities have already been further extended in 2015 with the advent of applications such as Periscope and Meerkat, which now enable citizen journalists to deliver live video over their social media applications.

Much of the debate on the impact of this has been dominated by a discourse that contests the transformative potential of new technology for radical political change (e.g. Rheingold 2002; Van de Donk et al. 2004; Shirky 2008; Ambinder 2009) with a deeply skeptical view that stresses the banality and superficiality of most online participation (Morozov 2009; Gladwell 2010). While the former position argues that such ‘liberation’ technologies (Diamond 2010) open up new arenas for disobedience and contestation in which to “confront non-democratic regimes” (Golkar 2011), the latter claims that the very idea that liberalization is an inevitable consequence of the widespread use of the Internet is erroneous (Druzin and Li 2016: 38). Proponents of such views argue that there is nothing deterministic about the Internet, which, much like earlier forms of communication technology, can be used for good or ill. Indeed, several skeptics argue that far from fostering freedom and democracy, the Internet can be utilized “as a tool to solidify autocratic survival” (Rød and Weidman 2015: 348), with a growing number of regimes becoming increasingly sophisticated in their ability to mitigate the progressive effects of new information communication technologies. As the case studies in this chapter will show, there is evidence that autocrats are learning from the strategies of information control in countries such as China and Russia to become much more sophisticated in their management of the Internet. Such strategies include sophisticated filtering technologies; denial of service attacks; the deployment of regime-friendly Internet activists and bloggers; as well as periodic crackdowns on online dissidents, which serve as warnings to the public as a whole, thereby encouraging self-censorship by users.

Whereas much of the immediate work on social media and protest participation consisted of ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews, in recent years, the number of studies that have conducted quantitative analyses of the effects of the Internet on political activity and behavior has grown. Many of these now show that rather than encouraging weak levels of political engagement (Gladwell’s now infamous ‘slacktivist’ claim), precisely the opposite is true: in other words, Internet users are often more likely than nonusers to be politically active, and users of social media such as Facebook are even more so (Hampton et al. 2011; Bode et al. 2014). Others have attempted to measure the influence of online activism on real-world protest (e.g. Jungherr and Jürgens 2013; Vasi and Suh 2013; Recuero et al. 2014; Gainous, Wagner, and Abbott 2015, 2016). Ioni Vasi and Chan Suh’s study of the Occupy Wall Street movement, for example, found that Internet searches had a direct influence on the emergence of online activism and that Facebook and Twitter streams positively affected the spread of offline protests (ibid.: 322). Such findings confirm those by Sarah Gaby and Neal Caren (2012), and Jennifer Earl et al. (2013), which also concluded that both Twitter and Facebook streams were strongly connected to on-site events. Earl’s research supported arguments that have long been made in interviews with participants in protest movements, namely that Facebook use tends to be largely used to organize rallies, whereas Twitter usage was used on-site to coordinate protests (ibid.). Many of these studies are confined to US political behavior and other Western countries, not least because of the lack of data from the non-Western world and nondemocratic regimes in particular. Jason Gainous et al. (2015) is one exception. Using data from the Asian Barometer series, the
authors test whether use of the Internet leads to increased political participation. Their results show that in nondemocratic regimes, increased Internet use results in a decline in traditional forms of political participation but an increase in nontraditional forms of participation such as demonstrations, protests, and strikes. Francis Lee, Hsuan Chen, and Michael Chan’s (2017) analysis of the use of social media in Hong Kong during the Umbrella protests similarly found that social media use impacted on movement support and participation and that the sharing of information in particular deepened people’s participation in those protests.

While such studies are by no means exhaustive, they are nevertheless indicative. Taken together, such research means that we can move beyond the debate over whether social media use has a political impact to focus instead on the ‘magnitude’ of those effects on political behavior, communication, and participation. Since Asia is geographically vast and extraordinarily diverse, it is not possible in the confines of a single chapter to explore such effects across the region as a whole. Similarly, Asia consists of the full range of political regimes, from parliamentary liberal democracies (Bangladesh and India) to an absolutist monarchy (Brunei), a military government (Thailand), constitutional monarchies (Bhutan and Japan), presidential systems (Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan), single-party Communist rule (China, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam), and regimes that fall in the gray areas between authoritarianism and democratic rule (e.g. Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore). Any analysis, then, is going to have to consist of a select few cases with which to illustrate and analyze the effect that the Internet and social media has. If we accept the premise that the Internet does have a discernible effect on political participation and mobilization, we can posit that such effects are likely to be more pronounced and destabilizing in regimes that are not democratic. Consequently, this chapter selects three mini-case studies from which it will provide comparative and illustrative examples. The three cases are drawn from three of the four nondemocratic regime types: single-party Communist rule (China), military government (Thailand), and quasi-democratic (Malaysia).8

An overview of Internet use and social networking in Asia

Before discussing the impact of the Internet and social media in Asia, it is necessary to look at the number of Internet users in the region, how much that user base has grown since the turn of the century, and the popularity of different social media platforms. In 2001, it was estimated that there were 332 million Internet users worldwide, of which 72 percent were located in Europe and North America (excluding Mexico). By 2016, that number had risen to a staggering 3.5 billion users, with almost half (49.5 percent) located in Asia in contrast to just 26.2 percent in Europe and North America combined (Internet World Stats). While the growth of the Internet worldwide has risen exponentially over the past decade and a half, the growth in the number of users in Asia far outstripped that of the West. Between 2000 and 2016, Asia’s Internet population grew by an astonishing 1,445 percent against 485 percent in Europe and only 196 percent in North America. Today, East Asia has eight of the twenty largest Internet populations in the world (see Table 27.1): China (1), India (2), Japan (4), Indonesia (8), Bangladesh (13), Vietnam (14), the Philippines (15), South Korea (17), and Thailand (18). In addition, Malaysia has an Internet penetration rate that not only exceeds the Asian average (44.2 percent) but also those found in a number of European countries. For example, with an Internet penetration rate of 68.1 percent, Malaysia has a larger share of its population online than Greece (63.2 percent), Serbia (66.2 percent), and Poland (67.6 percent).

But what about social media? How extensive is social media in Asia, and which applications and tools do Asian publics use? With over 1.6 billion users worldwide, Facebook has
Politics of the Internet and social media

grown to dominate social networking services and has become a core measure in any survey of Internet use. As of June 2016, it was estimated that approximately a third of all Facebook users were located in Asia, with 9 of the top 15 markets for the company found in the region. Across Asia, Facebook is by far the most popular social network, reaching an average of 87 percent of users across those nine countries (see Table 27.2). Twitter, while the next most popular social media application, is a long way behind, with a reach of only 38.7 percent. With 157 million users, India is not only the largest market for Facebook in Asia but is also the company’s second largest market worldwide. Indonesia ranks globally as Facebook’s fourth-largest market, with China and the Philippines fifth and seventh, respectively (China’s presence in the top ten is of particular note since the social media site is officially blocked by the Chinese authorities). In terms of Twitter, Indonesian Internet users have become avid

Table 27.1 Asian countries by Internet population (over 20 million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total # Internet users (million)</th>
<th>Internet penetration (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>721.4</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>462.1</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>115.1</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Internet World Stats. Data for June 2016.*

Table 27.2 Facebook visitor reach as a percentage of Internet users. Top 15 countries 1st quarter 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage of reach (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=</td>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1=</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6=</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6=</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Statista; Internet World Stats.*
fans of the microblogging site. Measured by the number of Twitter users as a proportion of total Internet users, Indonesia is the “most Twitter addicted nation on the planet” with 69–74 percent of Indonesian netizens using the microblogging site (Sidner 2010; Reuters 2016a; Statista). Moreover, in terms of the number of users actively tweeting monthly, Indonesia ranks third after the United States and Japan, generating 6.5 percent of all tweets globally.

Since China blocked Facebook in 2008, and Twitter and YouTube in 2009, Chinese microblogging websites have taken full advantage of consumer demand for social media platforms. The two main social media applications within China are Qzone and Weibo. While Qzone is usually compared to Facebook and Weibo to Twitter, both social networks combine elements of Facebook and Twitter in their respective platforms. Most notably, unlike on Twitter, Weibo users can insert images, videos, and music directly into their posts, while comments are visible as an attached thread rather than separately in Twitter’s @mention tab. Since Qzone was launched in 2005, it has grown into China’s largest social network, with approximately 640 million (Statista) monthly active users (MAUs). Weibo, founded four years later, is the second largest, with 282 million MAUs and used by approximately one-third (33.5 percent) of Chinese Internet users (CINIC 2016; China Internet Watch 2016). Ranking both networks globally, Qzone is the sixth most popular social network, and Weibo is the 13th (Statista). However, such figures include instant messaging services (see Table 27.3), which functionally are very different from social networking services, like Facebook, or microblogging services, like Twitter and Weibo. If we exclude these from the count, then Qzone is the second-largest social network behind Facebook, with Weibo in sixth place.10

Clearly then, Internet and social media use in Asia is now ubiquitous. While early studies of the Internet highlighted a number of digital divides that potentially would exacerbate technological disparities between developed and developing world countries (Abbott 2001), most of these have been overcome by the development of mobile Internet services and the proliferation of smartphones. Similarly, the development of icon-driven and voice-activated applications, as well as non-English language content, have reduced the barriers that were posed by literacy and language (Venkatraman 2014).11 Given such pervasiveness, what can

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social networking application</th>
<th>Active users in millions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>2,061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Messenger</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeChat</td>
<td>963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qzone</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sina Weibo</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baidu Tieba</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viber</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Statista 2017.
Sites italicized are all Chinese language social media applications.
we discern about the social and political consequences this is having? The following section seeks to address this by analyzing the cases of Malaysia, Thailand, and China. These micro-cases are selected to be illustrative of both the potential effects the Internet and social media can have and the broader theoretical debate between the contending libertarian and skeptical interpretations of such effects.

Malaysia: letting the genie out of the bottle?

Malaysia has proved to be a fertile ground for studies on the potential liberalizing effects of the Internet in countries in which civil liberties face considerable constraints (Abbott 2012; Weiss 2012; Tapsell 2013a; Yun-han and Welsh 2015). Much has been made of the emergence of a vibrant alternative online mediascape in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the political turmoil that it set in motion. Moreover, Internet access and penetration developed rapidly as a result of the specific targeting of the information communications and technology sector as an engine of future growth. The Mahathir administration in particular launched a much-vaunted megaproject, the Multimedia Super Corridor, with a purpose-built knowledge hub called Cyberjaya at its heart (Sklair 2010). In order to entice international investment into the project, the Mahathir administration created an international board of advisors that was composed of prominent tech gurus and global IT CEOs (CNN 2000) and enshrined a commitment against Internet censorship into the project’s Bill of Guarantees (Huff 2002).

The combined effect of these measures resulted in the rapid emergence of online media platforms that provided a critical voice to opponents of the regime (Postill 2014). While some of these were little more than accusatory diatribes, others soon matured into relatively sophisticated media outlets of which perhaps the most famous, and most discussed, is the online news portal Malaysiakini (e.g. Steele 2008). The significance here of Malaysiakini is that in a country in which the traditional print media displays evident bias toward the governing parties and is either directly or indirectly owned by them, Malaysiakini was able to establish itself as a respected alternative source of news and information. In addition, it soon became one of the country’s leading websites, its success spurring the establishment of a host of similar ‘independent’ news portals.

Opposition political parties were also quick to develop a web presence and in so doing circumvent restrictions that could be imposed on their print publications by the Printing Presses and Publications Act. The opposition Islamic political party, PAS, for example, responded to the government’s restricting the publication of its newspaper Harakah from biweekly to bimonthly in March 2000 by pouring resources into an online version, HarakahDaily (Rodan 2002: 73). Within a year, it had already incorporated video feed and continued to add greater functionality at an impressive rate. Today, HarakahDaily includes a Malay- and an English-language site; multimedia resources; RSS; a Twitter feed; podcasts; a version for cell phones; letters pages; columns; and a link to its Facebook page, which has almost a million likes.

The other significant online development in Malaysia was the rapid growth in the popularity and influence of blogs, and political blogs in particular, between 2003 and 2008. Such was the rapid early adoption of blogging in Malaysia that in 2010, it had one of the highest proportions of bloggers per head in the world and despite its relatively medium-sized population ranked third in Asia in terms of the total number of blogs (Sysomos 2010). Among the most notable political bloggers during this period were Jeff Ooi and Tony Pua; Ooi’s “Screenshots” blog, which he began in 2003, won the Asia category of the Freedom Blogs Award from the press freedom advocacy group Reporters Without Borders in 2005 and became one of the most read blogs in Malaysia. Indeed, Joseph Liow and Afif Pasuni (2010), Andreas...
Ufen (2008), and Ibrahim Suffian (2010) have argued that bloggers played an important role in the 2008 Malaysian general election, in which the governing coalition lost its two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969. In particular, bloggers were seen as playing a role in mobilizing first-time voters in urban and semi-urban areas. At that election, several prominent bloggers, including Ooi and Pua, stood for office and were elected to parliament (Lim 2009).

While blogging had a disproportionate influence in the 2008 election, five years later, blogs had largely been surpassed by social media, with Facebook and Twitter becoming key battlegrounds for younger, urban, and more educated Malaysian voters (Tapsell 2013b). That is not to say that political blogging no longer attracted attention: The former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, for example, became a surprisingly vocal critic of the government and has attracted over 20 million hits (Malaysiakini 2016). Rather, it is to say that social media applications now became the principal terrain on which online political critique, debate, parody, and satire took place. At the 2008 election, both Facebook and Twitter were relatively new and not widely used at the time. This time, however, members of the governing Barisan Nasional coalition were as quick to take advantage of these platforms as members of the opposition, although some commentators questioned whether overall there still remained a significant news media competency gap between the two sides (Weiss 2013: 601).

Social media made arguably its biggest impact in Malaysia, however, in the mobilization and coordination of a series of high-profile mass demonstrations by the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH). While the organization had held its first mass protest in 2007, it turned heavily to social media in order to mobilize the public for its second major demonstration in July 2011, particularly following decisions by the government to declare both the proposed rally and BERSIH itself illegal (Gooch 2011). Despite such actions approximately 20,000 people took part in the protest, and on the day Twitter use spiked as protestors took to the microblogging site to inform each other of the location of riot police (Weiss ibid.) as well as to share eyewitness accounts and documentary evidence of police brutality via Twitter’s infamous hashtag function. Postill (2014), for example, notes that between June 9 and August 14, 2011, 263,000 tweets were sent with the hashtag #bersih. BERSIH subsequently organized two further demonstrations in April 2012 and August 2015. What was notable about both these was that social media was used to coordinate an international day of protest with the Malaysian diaspora mobilized to organize companion rallies worldwide (FMT 2012).

For commentators such as Chin-Huat Wong, James Chin, and Norani Othman (2010), Meredith Weiss (2012, 2013), Bridget Welsh (2011), and John Postill (ibid.), what these examples reveal is that for all of the restrictions on civil liberties in Malaysia the Internet and social media have potentially ushered in a new era of grassroots politics in which social media is enabling civil society to overcome the ethnic divisions that have long been the principal societal cleavage in Malaysian politics. While some, such as Postill, are more optimistic than others about the impact this may have, these examples do appear to support the hypothesis that the Internet can bring about a liberalizing effect on politics in closed or semi-closed states. Indeed, recent survey work demonstrates that there is a correlation between the use of the Internet in Malaysia as a primary source of information and news and the proclivity to take part in nontraditional forms of political participation, such as demonstrations (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2016).

**Thailand’s battle royale on the Internet**

For over a decade now Thailand’s political system has been wracked by almost continuous political turmoil. The May 2014 military coup d’état was the latest stage in a seemingly endless impasse between the country’s traditional royalist–military elite and the supporters...
of populist political forces that first elected Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in 2001 (McCargo 2005). Despite reengineering the country’s constitution in 2007, as well as its electoral rules, pro-royalist groups were unable to prevent successors to Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party from winning nationwide elections in 2007 and 2011 (Prashanth 2016). Anger and frustration on both sides led to frequent mass demonstrations, with escalating violence between pro-royalist ‘yellow shirts’ and their ‘red-shirt’ pro-Shinawatra counterparts that were in part used as an excuse for the latest military takeover.

Alongside this struggle on the streets has been a simultaneous online ‘battle royale’ (Thammo 2009), first with anti-Thaksin websites playing a prominent role in the mobilization of anti-government and pro-monarchy groups (Thammo 2009; Chaisukkosol 2010), followed subsequently by red-shirt organizations especially after the ouster of Thaksin in the 2006 coup. More recently, the military launched a crackdown on online dissent in general that has seen it utilize existing legislation against freedom of speech as well as pass new laws that attempt to curb Internet activities (Tan 2014). The crackdown starkly reveals the nature of online political confrontation, specifically the strategies adopted by both political authorities that seek to curb online expression and activists who wish to circumvent them. In the case of Thailand governments have used a panoply of tactics from existing legislation against defamation and sedition to laws specifically passed to counter online dissent, as well as extensive filtering (Saksith 2014a), website blocking (Prachatai 2014), and deploying pro-regime activists online to troll and inform on government critics (Saksith 2014b).

The main legal tools used to restrict Internet use in Thailand are the 2017 Computer Crime Act (CCA) and the country’s infamous lèse majesté law. The CCA allows terms of up to five years imprisonment for publishing content that is false or that may endanger individuals, the public, or national security. The use of proxy servers to access restricted material is also criminalized (Freedom House 2015a), while the Act allows the government to block websites and suppress content. Among a series of provisions directed at hacking and data security. Article 14 of the CCA allows authorities to charge Internet users with infringing on national security or for viewing any website deemed “illegal, offensive or obscene” (WikiLeaks). In addition, by making content via a computer subject to offenses that are already crimes in the Thai penal code, the Act ensured that the lèse majesté laws applied to computer-mediated communication. The lèse majesté law was first introduced in 1900, when it became a crime to defame the monarchy. However, the current law, which makes it an offense to defame, insult, or threaten the King, Queen, heir apparent, or Regent, was introduced as Article 112 of the 1957 Criminal Code. The scope of this definition was widened further in the 2007 Constitution, which was introduced a year after the military coup that overthrew the Thaksin government, to state that “No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action” (Streckfuss 2011).

Since the 2006 coup there has been a sharp escalation in the government’s campaign against Internet dissent with Thai authorities charging more Internet users and Internet Service Providers with these offenses than any others. According to data from Freedom House, between 2007 and 2011, 325 people were charged under the CCA of which 66 percent related to violations of content. Of these 100 were defamation charges and a further 46 were lèse majesté violations (Freedom House 2013). Overall, the number of people charged with violations of the lèse majesté law has increased sharply, from an average of five to six cases a year in the previous two decades to 33 (Streckfuss ibid.: 194ff) in 2005, peaking at 478 in 2010 following red-shirt protests (Pilling 2011). In the 12 months immediately following the 2014 coup, lèse majesté charges again climbed with 47 charged with violating Article 112 (FIDH 2015). Moreover, after the coup the jurisdiction for all cases involving lèse majesté offenses was transferred to military tribunals, a situation that “has pushed the lèse majesté law into
worrying territory” (IBA 2015). Of those charged all but four were denied bail with nearly two-thirds detained for at least a year awaiting trial. In addition, “nearly 75 per cent of lèse majesté arrests, detentions and imprisonments have been related to the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression” (FIDH 2016: 7), including many notable cases involving Internet and social media content. The following examples, although by no means exhaustive, serve to illustrate the extent to which the military junta has cracked down on online dissent.

Following the coup, former Education Minister Chaturon Chaisang and the social activist Sombat Boonngamanong were called to report to authorities in what have been subsequently dubbed ‘attitude adjustment’ sessions (Amnesty International 2014). Both men refused and turned to social media to show their protest. As a result, both were charged under the Sedition Act as well as the CCA. In addition to Facebook posts signaling his refusal to report to authorities, Chaturon made a speech in May to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand criticizing military rule, which was subsequently posted on Facebook while Boonngamanong famously goaded authorities “to catch me if you can” in a post (The Nation 2014). In addition, Boonngamanong called for flash mob protests at which participants were encouraged to wear masks and to post selfies of them making the three-finger salute from the dystopian science fiction movie series The Hunger Games. The irony of a protest salute against a fictional totalitarian regime was not lost on the international media. Indeed, in November 2014, six students were detained by police for making the sign at a speech given by the Prime Minister Chan-o-cha in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen (The Telegraph 2014).

Other notable examples of the arrest of activists for social media use include Thiensutham Suthijitseranee, Sam Parr (Phongsak), Rung Sira (Sirapop Kornhaut), and Patnaree Chankij. Thiensutham was arrested and found guilty of five counts of defaming the monarchy in a series of Facebook posts between July and November 2014.13 In these, he posted messages and images that were primarily critical of the military government, but which allegedly also ‘mentioned’ the institution of the monarchy. When he was sentenced on March 31, 2015 to 50 years imprisonment, this was the harshest sentence passed against a social media activist. Thiensutham’s sentence, however, was surpassed five months later during the trial of Phongsak. Arrested in December 2014, he was found guilty of six counts of defaming the monarchy in a series of Facebook posts. Despite confessing to being drunk and depressed when he made these posts, he was sentenced to 60 years in prison, which was reduced by half because he pleaded guilty (Wongwat 2016a). One of the most interesting features of the case of Phongsak is that testimony suggests that he had been coaxed and encouraged online by an officer over the course of four to five months (ibid.). Unlike Yai and Phongsak, poet and cyber activist Sirapop has refused to plead guilty to charges of lèse majesté for posting satirical pictures and poems that were critical of the ruling elite (Wongwat 2016b). Held without bail since his initial arrest in June 2014, he challenged whether the military court had the jurisdiction to try him for these alleged crimes. Sirapop’s challenge was dismissed by the Court Jurisdiction Committee in January 2016, and if he is found guilty of lèse majesté, he could face up to 45 years in prison. In contrast to the earlier examples, Patnaree’s arrest in August 2015 was for the seemingly innocuous act of replying ‘yes’ to a private Facebook message from the friend of her son that was critical of the Thai monarchy. Patnaree denies any wrongdoing, accusing the government instead of targeting her because her son Sirawith Seritiwath is a prominent student dissident and vocal critic of the regime. If found guilty, Patnaree could be sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment (Reuters 2016b).

While Thailand has a long history of censoring websites (WikiLeaks), it has to date not deliberately blocked or throttled Internet or cell phone connections for political reasons. Nevertheless, since the coup blocking of websites and takedown requests have increased sharply (Freedom House 2015a). Whereas prior to the coup, it was necessary to secure a warrant to
Politics of the Internet and social media

block websites, now it is the responsibility of public officials and Internet Service Providers to use their judgment as to whether sites contravene a series of decrees from the National Council for Peace and Order that banned content that could cause conflict and disorder. Within days of the coup, the military blocked over 100 websites, including the nonprofit online news site Prachatai, the website of the British newspaper The Daily Mail (Watson 2014), and briefly Facebook (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2014). By December this had risen to over 1,200, making the total number of websites blocked since the previous coup in 2007 over 150,000 (Asia Sentinel 2016). In addition, the Secretary-General of Thailand’s National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission asked Facebook and YouTube to remove content that was critical of the Thai monarchy. Google, who own YouTube, was specifically asked to expedite the process by which governments can request that specific sites be blocked (Asian Correspondent 2016). While the Internet giant refused, it has in the past agreed to requests from the Thai government to remove content that was deemed to insult the monarchy.

In an effort to improve the monitoring of Internet activity, Thailand’s Technology Crime Suppression Division published a series of documents in January 2016 outlining procurement plans to build a surveillance system that would allow them to monitor all posts on Facebook, Twitter, and the Thai portal Patnip. The system, if it is ever realized, would be able not only to monitor the content of users but also all interactions with it, including all likes, shares, and comments (Sambandaraksa 2016). Alongside this, the government has also made efforts to improve and increase the effectiveness of Internet monitoring and have encouraged private citizens to report online content. Beginning in 2010 the government launched a cyber scout project to create a network of almost 400 cyber scouts from across the country (Saksith 2010). In July 2014, shortly after the coup, the Ministry of Information Communication and Technology announced it would expand this by a further 500 (Saksith 2014b).

As the selection of examples earlier demonstrate, the Thai government has largely deployed the existing criminal code against Internet activists to stymie online dissent. As in the case of other authoritarian regimes one can suggest that the purpose of passing disproportionate sentences against activists that have posted critical content is to force Internet users in Thailand to censor themselves in fear of retribution. Nevertheless, despite all of the measures discussed earlier, the Internet continues to be a site of opposition to the military. In January 2016, for example, hacker group Anonymous defaced 15 Thai police websites in protest at the treatment of two Burmese men accused of killing two British backpackers (Holmes 2016). Declaring ‘war’ on the Thai government, the group launched the campaign #BoycottThailand, which has since resulted in additional attacks by hackers. Ten days after the initial attack, a Burmese affiliate of Anonymous, the Blind Hacker Group, launched denial of service attacks on hundreds of Thai court websites that exposed over 1 GB of data that belonged to the Supreme Court (Sasiwan 2016). Moreover, while the military is attempting to silence Internet dissent, social media continues to grow in popularity in the country with more than 90 percent of Thailand’s 41 million Internet users on social media. In addition, cell phone subscriptions exceed the country’s population, with 86 million phone subscriptions for 67 million people (Privacy International, 2016). Although most cell phones in Thailand are still feature phones, since 2013, the number of smartphones sold has grown rapidly. Across Thai phone networks, one of the most popular applications in the country is the Japanese messaging service Line, which allows users to exchange texts, images, audio, and make free voice-over IP video calls. With over 30 million users, Line is almost as popular as Facebook (Russell 2016). While the company has been accused of sharing information in the past with the Thai military, the launch of end-to-end encryption for sending messages in October 2015 presents dissidents with the opportunity to evade the junta’s recent crackdown (Russell 2015).
China: Internet activism behind the firewall

If Malaysia, at least until very recently,14 presented an example of the impact that the Internet can have when online activity is relatively unimpaired, then China presents, in some ways, the polar opposite. In comparative studies of the Internet China usually attracts intense scrutiny because of the extensive array of banned and blocked websites, Internet controls, filtering, monitoring, and surveillance that the Communist regime conducts. Collectively this is more commonly referred to as the “Great Firewall of China,”15 although frequently the nature of this firewall is misunderstood or misinterpreted to suggest that the Internet in China operates like a closed intranet cut off from the broader world wide web. The Great Firewall, however, is only an aspect of the regime’s larger project of censorship and control, known as 金盾工程 (jīndùn gōngchéng) or Golden Shield, by which the Chinese government attempts to prevent individuals from using the Internet in any way that could "harm" national security or the wider interests of the state and society. Such activities were first proscribed in the 1997 Computer Information Network and Internet Security Protection and Management Regulations (Lehman and Xu n.d.).

Initially, the Golden Shield project was envisaged as a comprehensive “nationwide digital surveillance network linking national, regional and local security agencies with a panoptic web of surveillance” (Walton 2001: 28). However, the rapid growth of the Internet in China necessitated rapid adjustments to the project that shifted the locus of control to restricting what individual users could access using filtering technology at the eight main network gateways16 that connect China’s information network to the broader world wide web. What this means in practice is that the Chinese government is able to deploy a variety of technical controls on traffic at these points to ostensibly restrict access to 'undesirable' content and websites, including Domain Name Server (DNS) blocking, IP address blocking, Uniform Resource Locator (URL) filtering, and deep packet inspection (DPI).

The first layer of control in the Golden Shield project is blocking access to certain domain names so that Chinese users are simply unable to access the sites.17 According to one ongoing survey of Internet censorship in China18 such tactics are deployed against 135 of the top 1000 domain names in the world, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google (including non-English languages versions), and Gmail. At the next level China blocks access to specific ‘numerical’ IP addresses so that users cannot circumvent the DNS block by accessing the address directly. Of almost 19,000 IP addresses monitored, 35 percent were blocked. The third layer, URL blocking, routinely occurs by using sophisticated filtering technology to look for keywords in a domain name that refer to specific words that are prohibited. Thus, while most English language URLs of Wikipedia are not blocked, most URLs of Wikipedia’s Chinese language version are. Beginning sometime between mid-2011 and late 2012 China also began deploying DPI signaling a broader crackdown on Internet activity that has only intensified under the presidency of Xi Jinping (Jacobs 2015).

DPI works by looking in detail at the contents of data being sent across a network. While all networks use DPI to a certain degree for the most part its use is largely innocuous allowing a network provider to prioritize bandwidth-dependent data (such as streaming media like Netflix) or to search packets of data for viruses or other malware. However, the technology can also be used, as it is in China, to search packets of data for certain keywords or kinds of data in order to block the traffic. China has increasingly used DPI to block virtual private network (VPN) software, a type of software that creates a tunnel between a user’s computer and a server that acts as a portal to the Internet. That tunnel is normally 'secure,' which previously meant that it was encrypted and could not be read. Such VPNs enabled many Chinese users to circumvent many of the controls they faced on the Internet. However, increasingly sophisticated DPI has enabled the
Chinese government to render all but the most obfuscated VPNs nonfunctional (Arthur 2011). In addition, the Chinese government have increasingly proclaimed that countries have a right to choose how to develop and regulate their own Internet. Dubbed Internet or ‘cyber’ sovereignty by the Chinese, the concept was forcefully articulated by President Xi at an Internet conference held in Wuzhen in December 2015 (Spencer 2015). Of particular concern for Western information communication technology companies are rules published in a 22-page document issued in December 2014 that would require them to hand over encryption keys, source code, and install backdoors into hardware and software (Mozur 2015). Such a policy has led some to question the extent to which we can still talk of a truly global world wide web as opposed to the ‘Balkanization’ of the Internet into discrete segmented units (Diebert et al. 2008: 31).

Yet the existence of the Great Firewall of China does not mean that political dissent and social and political mobilization on the Internet has been absent. Indeed, as the following examples demonstrate, even where authoritarian regimes operate sophisticated policies and practices of Internet censorship and control, the nature of the technology and applications associated with the Internet mean that so far it has proved impossible to fully mitigate the liberalizing effects that have accompanied it. In the case of China ordinary users have demonstrated often ingenious ways of subverting official controls while the most determined hacktivists continue to find circumvention tools that enable them to bypass the Great Firewall (MacKinnon 2012: 35).

As elsewhere social networking has been extraordinarily popular in China with exponential growth in the number of Chinese using the various applications available. While Facebook and Twitter may be banned in China, comparable social media applications are provided by Chinese companies. Of these as mentioned earlier the largest are Qzone and Weibo. To date it is estimated that 77 percent of Chinese Internet users are active on at least one social media network of which Qzone is the largest. In addition, instant messaging has also proven extremely popular with the hybrid cross-platform WeChat driving the number of Chinese that regularly use an online instant messaging service to over 90 percent of all Internet users (Statista).

Several scholars of Internet politics in China (e.g. Yang 2009; Fung et al. 2013; Gleiss 2015) highlight the role the Internet plays in enabling public opinion to exert “communicative pressure on governments and public agencies to change policies” (Gleiss ibid.: 515). In a growing number of arenas, they argue, Chinese Internet users are influencing public policy. Examples are replete from forced demolition (popularized by the so-called ‘nailhouse’ phenomenon), to illegal land seizures (Givens and MacDonald 2011), food safety, opposition to dam building, and the exposing of corruption via the phenomenon of the ‘human-flesh search engines’—renrou sousuo yinqing (Fletcher 2008; Downey 2010).

Gleiss (ibid.), for example, highlights the important role played in China of “indirect, disguised and deceptive” forms of political conflict that allow civil society in China to critique the ruling Communist party by articulating alternative political discourses. He illustrates with the example of a charity ‘Love Save Pneumoconiosis’ (LSP) that campaigns for workers suffering from the disease. Analyzing Weibo posts by LSP activists Gleiss argues that the charity skillfully navigates the contested political terrain in China in several ways. First, by focusing on the suffering of workers it challenges the dominant representation of China’s economic development being synonymous with progress. Second, by focusing on the suffering of workers it highlights social problems that neither the party nor the media have adequately addressed. However, since there remains significant opacity in what is considered politically sensitive LSP activists deliberately write about the suffering of individuals and on the importance of saving lives rather than highlighting more overtly political issues, such as local government corruption. Focusing on such “individual micro-narratives” (ibid.: 524) enables activists to effectively depoliticize the issues. Finally, LSP activists are careful to
define their organization as a charity rather than an advocacy NGO with their social media largely targeted at raising awareness and fundraising. This enables them to be more vocal than if they were advocating for compensation and worker rights (ibid.). While this example may appear trivial it does illustrate how even in resilient authoritarian regimes societal actors can still use the Internet and social media to champion their causes.

Even with China’s extensive Internet censorship regime bloggers have been central in exerting public pressure on government and public officials, particularly between 2006 and 2012. Two of China’s most famous bloggers in this period were Han Han and Zhou ‘Zuola’ Sugang. At the peak of his fame, Han was arguably the most widely read blogger in the world (Wasserstrom 2012), with his site visited over half a billion times and each post garnering over a million page views. He first achieved celebrity status with the publication of his novel *Triple Door* in 1999. A scathing satire of Chinese education and authority, it sold over two million copies and became one of the best-selling novels of the past 20 years (Osnos 2011). In 2006, he began blogging touching on topics of corruption, censorship, pollution, and economic inequality. Among his most read posts were an essay about a July 2011 train crash in Zhejiang (Han 2011), a speech he gave at Xiamen University criticizing the Chinese government’s approach to literature and culture (Han 2010), and a trio of widely discussed essays on political and cultural reform in China (Goodman 2011). His pop culture status was sealed by a parallel career as a race-car driver earning him corporate sponsorships and front pages on a host of Chinese style magazines (Osnos ibid.). Although censors frequently deleted his posts, they were often too late to prevent their widespread dissemination thanks to a legion of fans who circulated them via bulletin boards, e-mail, social media, and foreign websites. Often, he avoided censors by simply leaving a taboo word (Tiananmen, Taiwan, or Tibet) blank, allowing readers to fill the gap themselves (Grigg 2015). For example, when the imprisoned Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, he posted nothing but a pair of quotation marks with an empty space, a post that was viewed over a million times drawing over 25,000 comments (Jaivin 2010). Attempts by Han to launch a literary magazine in 2010, however, failed after a single issue. Despite catapulting to the number one spot of Amazon China, political pressure on publishers resulted in the second issue being stopped and pulped (Osnos ibid.).

Another celebrated blogger was Zhou ‘Zuola’ Shuguang. Zuola rose to prominence as one of China’s first activist citizen journalists (Capron 2013). In 2004, he began mostly documenting small protests and everyday corruption in Hunan province with videos shot from a handheld Samsung. One of the most famous stories he reported on involved a standoff between a Chongqing couple and a local property owner. The standoff had resulted in the home of Yang Wu and Wu Ping being the only property left standing in a construction site for new apartments a phenomenon referred to in Chinese as *dingzihu* or nailhouse. While Wu Ping’s standoff was by no means the first example of a *dingzihu* it was the first such case that garnered national attention largely because of Zhou’s coverage of it (Erie 2012: 42). Zhou’s blog posts and pictures were widely circulated online until the story was eventually picked up by mainstream newspapers and television (Ewing 2007). Soon after this, the government began blocking Zhou’s website within China as well as videos he had earlier uploaded to China’s version of YouTube *Youku*. In 2008, he famously reported on the riots in Guizhou that followed the alleged rape of a 16-year-old by the son of a prominent Weng’an official. Zola documented the protests, which swelled to several thousand, blogging about them on Twitter (Fowler and Ye 2008), arguably the first occasion that Twitter had ever been used to report a ‘mass incident’ within China. In 2012, after repeated harassment, Zhou left China for Taiwan.

Whether or not there was a brief period in which Chinese authorities tolerated a degree of critique on the Internet, the lack of explicit definition (prior to 2013) of what was forbidden
meant that bloggers and social media activists never knew how far they could push the boundaries. As Osnos remarks, “[d]ivining how far any individual can go in Chinese creative life is akin to carving a line in the sand at low tide in the dark” (ibid.). Anecdotal evidence plus recent findings by Gary King et al. (2014) suggests that the party was willing to allow criticism of the government (ibid.: 326) since it served to deflect popular anger, while censoring posts that might encourage collective action and social mobilization (ibid: 328). In this environment, the number of bloggers grew rapidly, concomitant with the rise of microblogging platform Weibo. These twin phenomena led to the emergence of a cadre of influential Weibo commentators who garnered millions of followers. These social media celebrities became known as ‘Big V’ bloggers, many of whom took advantage of their status to openly chastise corrupt officials and disseminate their views and opinions. The high watermark of social media dissent arguably occurred in 2012 when bloggers shared photos of Shaanxi official Yang Dacai on a series of inspection tours (Gu 2012). The images revealed that Yang possessed a collection of luxury Swiss watches conservatively estimated to have a combined value of $100,000, far beyond the salary of a mid-ranking official (Spegele 2012). According to Grigg (2015) the ‘Brother Watch’ incident “marked the start of a fleeting period where the Communist Party lost control of the narrative”. Over the next twelve months the number of allegations of corruption posted on Weibo more than doubled (ibid.), while a 2013 study of Weibo use by the Chinese University of Hong Kong showed that intensity of use was negatively correlated to trust in the political system, Communist rule, and the state-controlled media (Zhao et al. 2013). Such patterns led some to opine that if this continued the “Chinese Communist Party’s tight grip on China’s media landscape will inevitably loosen, foretelling major political and social changes” (Hassid 2012).

However, rather than the beginning of a new era the Brother Watch scandal signaled the start of a crackdown on online dissent. In September 2013, the Supreme People’s Court issued a legal interpretation that bloggers could be jailed for up to three years if a post that was considered defamatory was viewed more than 5000 times or shared more than 500 times. The circumstances in which such a post could be deemed defamatory included posting something that caused public disorder, ethnic or religious conflict, a ‘repugnant social impact’, harmed the national interest, had a negative international impact, or encouraged a ‘mass incident’.20 Two weeks before the interpretation was made, one of China’s prominent Big V bloggers, Charles Xue, with more than 12 million followers on Weibo, was targeted by state media for spreading rumors online and subsequently arrested for soliciting a prostitute (Spegele ibid.). While in prison, Xue ‘admitted’ that he had made mistakes online and signaled that he was precisely the kind of blogger that needed to be regulated. In the wake of his arrest, Chinese authorities deleted thousands of social media accounts and arrested hundreds of bloggers for spreading false rumors, including Dong Rubin and cartoonist Wang Liming (Reuters 2013).

These arrests, and the legal ruling by the Supreme Court, appears to have not only had the desired effect of deterring dissent on Weibo but also affected the application’s popularity. A study by the Institute for Data Science and Engineering of East China Normal University of 1.6 million Weibo users showed that within two weeks of Xue’s arrest the number of posts from the sample halved while between March 2012 and December 2013 the number of most active users within the sample fell 73 percent from 430,000 to 114,000 (Zhao et al. 2013). Moreover, whereas those users were responsible for 68 million posts in March 2012 by December the number had fallen to 17.9 million (ibid.). Such figures correspond with data released by Weibo itself at the beginning of 2014 that showed the number of users fell by almost 10 percent (Carsten 2014; Kuo 2014).

It is unlikely that this crackdown will signal the end of dissent on social media in China not least because there have been analogous campaigns in the past most notably in 2008 (Jacobs 2008)
and during the Arab Spring of 2011 (Branigan 2011). Furthermore, even if muzzled, Chinese Internet users have proven themselves extremely adept at finding alternative means to express themselves, most notably with the use of “memes as a vehicle for political and social critique” (Mina 2014: 359). The most infamous of these was the viral spread of the grass mud horse (cǎonímǎ 草泥马) meme and its struggle against its mortal enemy the river crab (hé xiē 河蟹). Since Chinese is a tonal language puns are commonplace because one can change meaning through subtle changes in the tones. Thus, grass mud horse written in different characters but with a similar set of tones can be a common vulgar insult, while river crab becomes harmony (héxié 和谐). The struggle between the grass mud horse and the river crab therefore becomes a struggle against the ‘harmonious socialist society’ pronounced by Chinese leader Hu Jintao in 2011. While this meme attracted particular attention in the Western media (Wines 2009), other subversive memes have been deployed by online activists as forms of political protest. One such example occurred following the high-profile arrest of prominent human rights lawyer Chen Guangcheng in 2011. Mina recounts how a variety of memes responded to the arrest, including selfies of users wearing Chen’s trademark sunglasses, images of Chen on T-shirts, and stickers (resembling the KFC colonel), while street art hashtags like #FreeGCC gained popularity (Mina ibid. 365). Similarly, when the US actor who played Batman, Christian Bale, was chased away by a man in a green coat following a failed attempt to meet with Chen in detention, Internet users lampooned the official as Pandaman in posters for a fake Batman vs Pandaman movie (Jiang 2012).

Mina argues that we should not be dismissive of such incidents since they illustrate mechanisms by which censorship and surveillance are subverted. In regimes that attempt to censor the media memes are arguably much more powerful because they disrupt “the single message of popular deference to the government … and break the illusion of unitary opinion” (ibid.: 368–369). Memes in this sense are part of a long tradition of subversive art forms from protest theater to graffiti. However, what arguably makes them more powerful is that whereas earlier forms of propaganda could only be consumed by the audience the Internet allows users to not only be consumers of images and information but also producers of content. Because the audience is no longer simply passive, it can now take advantage of the tools of social media and the Internet to alter the media and to disrupt/subvert it by reconfiguring the original message or image. As a result, memes also function to open a political space in which resistance discourses can emerge and flourish (Tang and Yang 2011: 687).

What the earlier examples illustrate is that despite extensive censorship and control the impact of the Internet in China has resulted in the opening up of spaces of contestation to millions of Chinese users. As new media proliferates and new applications and technological innovations emerge authoritarian regimes are forced to adapt and innovate as old, familiar forms of control struggle to respond. As regimes like China seek to harness new technologies as part of their broader approach to the global economy, the iron heel of earlier forms of authoritarianism risks stifling the creativity and innovation necessary to compete in the technological sector. As such the history of the Internet in China so far has been ‘a cat-and-mouse game’ between users and the government “with the one-party state experimenting with ways to constrain and control its explosive new media environment” (Weisberg 2012).

Conclusions

It is clear from the cases presented that the impacts of the Internet and social media in Asia will be context dependent. For example, studies have shown that the effects of the introduction of the Internet tend to be weaker in societies that were already more open rather than in ones that experience the “the catalyst of going from a very controlled public sphere to an
open, almost chaotic one in just a few years” (Tufekci 2014: 4). One can posit from the cases of Malaysia and Thailand presented here that the reverse is likely to be true as well, namely that where a regime had a relatively open public sphere attempts to resort to a much less free information and media environment will be met with greater pushback from civil society and a greater motivation by Internet users to evade censorship.21

A significant body of the literature on the Internet and its effects, as well as many of the examples given in this chapter, reveal that online social media have empowered activists and civil society in three key areas: public attention, evading censorship, and coordination or logistics. Moreover, even in a regime like China “old forms of gatekeeping, which depended on choke point access control to few broadcast outlets, neither work as effectively nor in the same way as they did in the past” (Tufekci ibid.). Thus, access to the Internet and social media mean people can now reach information that governments once could successfully deny them access to and share it to a much larger group. Moreover, as King et al. found in their study of millions of social media posts, the goal of Chinese censorship appears to be largely concerned with eliminating “discussions associated with events that have collective action potential” (2014: 339) rather than with criticism that makes the regime ‘look bad’.

Such nuanced censorship is indicative that the “initial wave of ignorance and misunderstanding” (Tufekci ibid.: 2) displayed by authoritarian governments toward the Internet is giving way to a more deft and dynamic relationship toward the Internet that Druzin and Li dub ‘controlled burning’. In addition, successful tactics deployed by one regime to counter dissenting voices online are being emulated by others in a process of authoritarian learning. As the examples in this chapter show, across Asia governments are learning to respond and adapt to their own situations. This includes employing existing laws against bloggers and social media users (especially the highest profile individuals), the filtering and blocking of websites, and the deployment of pro-regime supporters to monitor and troll online. The latest example of this pattern can be seen in countries, such as Iran and Thailand, that are either building, or discussing the construction of, an information infrastructure modeled on China’s Great Firewall (Ball and Gottlieb 2012; Bernard 2015; Gilbert 2015).

It would be erroneous, however, to assume that more sophisticated censorship, management, and regulation of the Internet means that regimes such as China have pacified the liberalizing effects of the Internet as Druzin and Li (2016) claim. Their bold claims largely rest on a relatively descriptive and superficial interpretation of the 2014 Hong Kong protests. The failure of those protests to spark wider political unrest in Hong Kong, let alone mainland China, is taken as evidence (1) that the political potential of the Internet is overstated and (2) that it is attributable to the successful management of the Internet by Chinese authorities. One can, however, just as equally assert that a series of sit-ins and protests that lasted 11 weeks and included some of the largest demonstrations against Communist rule in over two decades (Schouten 2016) is testimony to the potential of the Internet and social media. Rather than focus on the failure of the protests to either spread nationwide, or to achieve their political goals, the very fact that organizers were able to use social media and innovative applications, such as FireChat to occupy key areas of the territory and defy Beijing so openly speaks of the continuing instability that new technology is having on politics (Margetts et al. 2016: 217). It is also noteworthy that unlike in 1989 when lethal force was used to clear Tiananmen Square the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities largely chose to allow the protests to run out of steam in the face of waning public support due to the disruption to ordinary lives (Cheung, Nip, and Chow 2014; Curran, Young, and Hunter 2014).

What is clear from broader studies of the Internet and political mobilization is that Internet-led movements appear to suffer from the lack of centralized organization (Margetts et al. 2016). Rather than slacktivism the lack of both clear protest leaders and comprehensive
platforms appears to be a feature that emerges from the networked nature of rapidly organized movements that social media ferments. Indeed, surveys of participants of such movements frequently highlight the lack of leaders as a feature that attracts them to participate. What more analysis of such movements is beginning to indicate is that “while this appears a shortcut for protests, it also engenders weaknesses, as these protests do not signal the same level of capacity as previous protests, and [crucially] do not necessarily pose the same threat to governments and power” (Tufekci 2014: 15).

Similarly, while filtering and blocking rarely succeeds in completely preventing access to ‘undesirable’ websites, it does nevertheless raise the threshold for accessing them to those that are both sufficiently motivated and possess the requisite technological skills to do so. Nevertheless, in this cat-and-mouse game with censors “protestors (and criminals) are likely to remain one or more steps ahead” (Margetts et al. ibid. 217), not least because “technological innovation has become domesticated in everyday life” (ibid.). For example, for all their efforts at information control Beijing has repeatedly failed to cover up multiple ‘incidents’: be it the spread of SARS in 2003 (Cunningham 2003), the baby milk scandal in 2008 (Cha 2008), major riots in Tibet and Guizhou in 2008 (as discussed earlier23), and Xinjiang riots in 2009 (Clothey et al. 2016; Culpepper 2012). Even after the 2013 crackdown on microblogging, Weibo users flocked to the platform during the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong to express solidarity with protestors through satire (Luo 2014).

To conclude, regimes that attempt to control the Internet have to balance the contradictory goals of silencing dissent with the increasing importance of attracting foreign investment and technology in order to compete in the global economy. This has been dubbed the ‘dictator’s dilemma’ (Kedezie 1997) that authoritarian regimes face. While some suggest the dilemma is a false dichotomy (Berghal 2016) it is clear from the examples presented in this chapter that across Asia the Internet has become invaluable as a tool that enables individuals and groups to communicate, organize, and mobilize. While authoritarian regimes are proving more resilient than many thought possible, even the most successful regimes have failed to completely stymie online dissent. As WikiLeaks demonstrates, even the most sophisticated corporate and government firewalls are vulnerable to hackers and hacktivists. The Internet is no longer simply a tool or technology but increasingly a site of political contestation as well (Howard, Agarwal, and Hussain 2011) and a site that is not bounded discretely by sovereign territorial borders.

Notes
1 Other notable protest movements that were fueled by social media include the 2007 Buddhist monk uprising in Burma, known as the ‘Saffron revolution’, the Green movement in Iran in 2009, the 15M or Los Indignados movement in Spain that gave rise to the political party Podemos, Brazil’s ‘Vinegar’ protests in 2013, and the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014.
2 On September 19, 2007, Canadian backpacker Alex Bookbinder founded a Facebook Group called “Support the Monk’s protests in Burma”. Within ten days the group had over 100,000 members and became the focus for advocacy groups in the United States and the United Kingdom to coordinate an international day of action on October 6, by which time the group had over 400,000 members. The event was held in over 100 cities across 30 countries worldwide.
3 In a large-N analysis of autocratic regimes between 1993 and 2010, Rød and Wediman argue that contrary to the liberalization hypothesis increased Internet penetration was actually positively correlated with high levels of press censorship leading them to conclude that “the Internet can be used as a tool to solidify autocratic survival by shaping public opinion” (ibid. 345).
4 The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that, controlling for demographics, Internet users in the United States are more likely than non-Internet users to be involved in civic/political
activities, such as attending a political rally, 78 percent more likely to try to influence someone’s vote and 53 percent more likely to have voted or indicated an intention to vote.


Another is the study by White and MacAllister (2014) of the 2011 elections in Russia. They found that more frequent users of the Internet were more likely to view the election as unfair and that Facebook use was positively correlated to the likelihood of sharing the demands of protestors who contested the election.

The fourth type, absolutist monarchy is unique to Brunei. Since the country has a population second only to the Maldives as Asia’s smallest (401,000), and is an oil state, Brunei is neither archetypal, prototypical, nor representative as a case study either for the larger category of autocratic regimes or indeed Asian regimes. Instead it is much more typical of oil-rich Gulf monarchies.

Measured by the proportion of Internet users who visit the social media network by percentage reach.

QQ and Qzone are both provided by the Chinese company Tencent. QQ is not a social media service as such but instead an instant messaging service hybrid that allows users to play online social games, shop, and microblog. Qzone was launched as one of the social media applications of QQ. WeChat is the newest (2011) and fastest growing instant message/friend network hybrid in China. Unlike Weibo and Qzone messages are not ‘public’ and so it does not function like traditional social networking platforms. It has grown in popularity as the Chinese government has cracked down on microbloggers. Baidu Tieba is more akin to a search engine and bulletin board service, which were in many ways the predecessors of social networking services.

Venkatraman reports that he encountered illiterate users of the Internet in India who used social media daily on their prepaid phones. He comments “Though they did not know how to read texts, they viewed everything as pictures and symbols. So, access to YouTube/Facebook and the activities they performed within it (including Liking and Sharing) were guided by a visual/pictorial understanding of it rather than a textual understanding” (2014).

Pivotal in the mobilizing anti-Thaksin opposition was the website of media owner Sondhi Limthongkul www.manager.co.th, which regularly streamed video casts of his popular anti-Thaksin talk shows. In terms of the red shirts, a similar role has been played by the official website of the red shirt movement (www.udthailand.com and patnip.com) (Bunyavejchewin 2010); additionally, both sides have used online bulletin boards to spread their message, of which Rajadamneon Corner has been among the most influential: e.g. Thammo ibid.: 128).

Thiensutham Suthijitseranee is better known by the alias Yai Daengdueat.

Most commentators no longer consider the Internet in Malaysia to be as permissive as it previously had been. Since 2014 “covert cyberattacks appear to have evolved into a legal crackdown on the government’s political opponents” (Freedom House 2015b), including a 2015 amendment to the Sedition Act that allows the government to block online content.

The term “Great Firewall” was first coined by Wired magazine in 1997 to refer to processes that were already underway to regulate Internet activity (Barm and Ye 1997).

As well as requiring Internet Service Providers to filter and monitor content.

Usually referred to as DNS poisoning. When users access China’s DNS servers those servers have been ‘poisoned’ to redirect users to an incorrect address, which then shows as an invalid response.

Greatfire.org has been monitoring blocked websites and keywords in China since 2011.

According to Weibo in 2013 there were over 300 bloggers who had more than 5 million followers with the top five having more than 50 million.

21 Electronic Frontier Foundation reported that Malaysian Internet users seemed “well-versed in circumvention practices” with users of a Facebook Group for the now banned Sarawak Report suggesting “a wide variety of VPNs, Tor, and web-based proxies to get around the block” (Malcolm and West 2015).

22 FireChat connects cell phones using internal connections, such as Bluetooth, rather than the Internet. This allows users to evade Internet censorship, and when large numbers of users are simultaneously connected via the application the software effectively creates an ad hoc intranet (Bernard 2016).

23 See also Drew (2008).

24 For instance, when the number of Weibo users fell 9 percent following China’s crackdown on prominent bloggers in 2013 $500 million was wiped off the value of the company’s stock in New York (Moore 2014).

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Politics of the Internet and social media


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Politics of the Internet and social media

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