

Words on the Web

By Ma. Theresa Gallardo Jr.

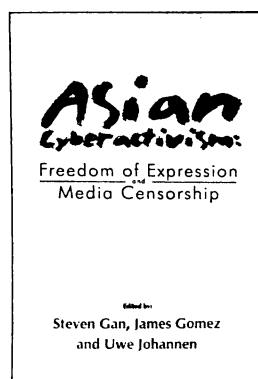
A review of Gan, Steven, James Gomez and Uwe Johannsen,
Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship

Rarely is the intent for which an invention was designed retained by human endeavour. Even radio, an invention more than a hundred years old, could not be kept to its original intent. Once used solely for the purpose of communication, it only became a broadcast tool half a century later.

The Internet is one such phenomenon. Many think of it as a technology so new that the human race may still be at the threshold of grasping the wholeness of it. The Internet's misinterpreted intent as a communication tool is clear in the fact that e-mail or chatrooms are often how most of us first experienced it. But when it became clearer that one can exploit the Internet's broadcasting aspect, it became a propaganda tool not much different from the much derided modern "news" papers.

As softwares became more sophisticated over the years and browsers became empowered with interactivity, as a broadcast tool, the Internet is fashioned into something similar to a most requested song, rather than a regular radio broadcast, as users' influence on its content is on a one-to-one correspondence. Leapfrogging to philosophical constructs of the Internet, many believe that precisely because of the Internet's interactive nature, knowledge within it should become less esoteric and our ways of experiencing it should become less compelling as it loses its authority in a sea of opinions. In theory, any propaganda loses its power to captivate when it appears lacking in popularity or public acceptance and yet fascination or intimidation with the printed word remains strongly in place.

Thus, ironically, internet content is still very much considered threatening more evidently by those who hold power and authority to curtail it. The best explanation



for this may be found in E.B. White's novel, "Charlotte's Web". Charlotte, the spider, convinces Wilbur the pig that she will broadcast Wilbur as "terrific" by weaving the word terrific on her web. In this way, passersby will see the word "terrific" on the web hovering over Wilbur. Out of fascination, Wilbur's owner might spare him from becoming the next meal. "But, Charlotte," said Wilbur, "I'm *not* terrific." "That doesn't make a particle of difference," replied Charlotte. "Not a particle. People believe almost anything they see in print."

Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship discusses the different ways that prevailing powers have tried to encase the Internet's reach and how activists and subversives have tried to evade such censorship and surprisingly bring on the downfall of their leaders and other less fortunate outcomes. The basic question posited by the book is: "To what extent can the Internet aid the achievement of democracy?" Most Asian governments have a line of despots in their histories, such as Burma, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, Bhutan, among others. And that these countries would censor the Internet is predictable.

Most of the writers in the anthology have the view of cyberactivists as those who oppose their government's policies, means or even mandate, and therefore are most likely at the receiving end of censorship. However, a reading of the book is bound to result in many startling realisations because its authors effectively compel us to confront much more.

Internet cafes, thus, have become a venue for cyberactivism. Jumping from one cybercafe to another, activists can retain anonymity, especially if their web domains do not require real identity registrations.

Indrajit Banerjee suggests that “self-censorship” is the culprit in slowing down the Internet as a catalyst of free speech, especially in Malaysia, Singapore and Burma. “Self-censorship” was coined by James Gomez in another book “Self-Censorship: Singapore’s Shame”. Self-censorship is what psychologists have termed “learned helplessness”—a phenomenon when a person, having learned her or his limits forcibly, would act as if these limits were still in place even after being presented with some kind of “freedom”—the expansion of space, or the absence of restrictions. Apathy as the internalisation of restrictions, discipline, or social shock is its direct result.

The social shock is also taken up in Terence Lee’s “Emulating Singapore,” which studies the way the Singaporean government “disciplined” Bloomberg, a U.S.-based news agency, after it published a critical piece on Singapore.

Zulfikar Mohamad Sharif, founder and erstwhile editor of the controversial Fateha.com, illustrates the culture of fear that plagued his website, which eventually gave in to Singapore’s well-managed structures of harassment and paranoia. Sharif now lives away from Singapore after stubbornly highlighting the Singapore government’s institutionalised discrimination against Muslims and Malays. Although Sharif did not intend Fateha.com to be the internet bastion of Muslim fundamentalism, to many Muslims, Fateha.com is “the voice of Singaporean Muslims”. In its pages was once articulated the idea that Osama bin Laden is a better Muslim leader than the Muslim leaders in Singapore.¹ This same comment was published in a sympathetic Muslim website, Islamonline.net.

While today’s Information Age, with its diversity of opinions, can bring about authentic human reflection, it is also a challenge to the less opinionated. For many years, broadcast media supplied the opinions to a highly receptive public. Many social scientists know that culture takes slower to change than science. Li Xiguang’s “ICT and the Demise of Propaganda: China’s Internet Experience” relates how China’s government used the Internet for control and manipulation of popular opinion by allowing only official sources of information to flourish.

That the Internet can be stifled or controlled does not only breach privacy, but also forces many to become immediate public figures, especially when under attack. In the Philippines, according to Alecks Pabico’s “New Media as Big Brother: the Philippines after September 11”, the National Bureau of Investigation has even snooped for the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). It is impossible that the FBI cannot find similar allies in other governments. Internet cafes, thus, have become a venue for Cyberactivism. Jumping from one cybercafe to another, activists can retain anonymity, especially if their web domains do not require real identity registrations.

Indeed, one cannot fault governments for not recognising the power of the Internet. Zafarullah Khan’s “Cyber Jihad: Fighting the Infidels from Pakistan” discusses the “virtual world of jihad” where believers of the Moslem holy war against infidels and their sympathizers are able to raise awareness or reinforce loyalty to their cause. It is not surprising if they will be able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding for their activities. Outside of the book, a website based in the United Kingdom, tells of a Global Jihad Fund, complete with bank account details of the al-Qaeda network.²

As a cause, jihad must compete with innumerable voices. And yet, despite the belief in jihad many Muslims even insist on respect for the lives of non-combatants. And there is no better way to inflame anger than with a medium that, because of its resemblance to print, has the tone of finality and expertise. “Jihadis in a way developed an art to convert civilian facilities, especially computers, into weapons and the cyberspace into a borderless battlefield,” wrote Khan. An illustration of this point is an Arabic website outlining strategies to force the United States to leave Iraq. Norwegian researchers suggest a link between the recent bombing of Madrid and the Arabic website’s naming of Spain as the “weakest link” among U.S. allies.³

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In Pakistan, Khan also points out, “unlike the major political parties, the *jihadi* outfits won’t be able to manipulate electoral arithmetic, but would continue to demonise the weak democracy” there.

Obviously, the book defines “cyberactivists” as advocates who have not achieved electoral affirmation. Much like civil society, they define their work as for the public good while remaining in the fringes perhaps because they are not elected or electable, or they lack funding, or are censored, or have not yet been accepted by popular culture. For movements such as these, the Internet can indeed be of great help.

In the case of Burma, Cyberactivism helped bring about the withdrawal of multimillion investments in order to “starve” the power of the ruling junta. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the venerable leader of the Burmese people, has repeatedly asked the international community to refrain from engaging in business with the junta, even if the Burmese community should starve with it.

Although radio remains the most common broadcast medium in all Asian countries, the Internet continues to fascinate a number of pundits, perhaps because they do not have to go through bureaucratic publishing houses to make public statements. The authors make a good case of pointing out distinctions between the realistic and unrealistic niches the Internet has carved in our mindscapes. The Internet as the solution to social exclusion is questioned by many of the authors, including

Judit Clarke’s “Democracy and New Communications Technology: The Asian Struggle.” Although having a web presence is easy, she says, only big money can achieve a critical mass of audience or readership. Susanna George and Luz Maria Martinez in “Digital Advocacy and The Women’s Movement: Global Success, Grassroots Challenge” also say that although the importance of the Internet for women is to transcend the patriarchal barriers, the Internet has still not changed offline modes of relations and existing power constructs.

As a medium for transcendence, the Internet provides not only limitless real estate of ideas to seven billion people worldwide. More important, it provides space for reflection, subversive or not. It allows people to commune with one another, to find kindred spirits that strengthen one’s resolve from his or her own offline experiences. The book’s ultimate revelation is that the Internet may serve more as a tool of reinforcement for believers than a medium to convert the heathens. One goes to the Internet when on “search mode” because the Internet is after all search-driven. Browsing almost always starts through a search engine.

However, one forms a connection with a particular website because of like-mindedness, that is, when reading the news on the Internet, many are already less vulnerable to the commercial content passing for facts we often get from traditional sources. Edited by respected thinkers in Asia, *Asian Cyberactivism* exposes many Asian governments’ panic over their own ignorance with technology or with unhampered space, as in “Manufacturing Control: New Legislations Threaten Democratic Gains in Indonesia,” Lukas Luwarso’s critique of the policies of Indonesia’s government. The book will help advocates everywhere gain lessons on the human spirit’s desire to be heard—and be heard accurately. ♪

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Footnotes

¹ <<http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2002-01/20/article66.shtml>>

² <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2002/01/27/nlse127.xml>>

³ <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/03/13/1078594602334.html>>