

Harvard-Yenching Institute Visiting Scholars Workshop
New Media, Cyber-activism and Social Movements in Asia

Background and Summary of Presentations

Background

The conference, titled *New Media, Cyber-activism and Social Movements in Asia*, took place on April 1st, 2015 at the Harvard Yenching Library Building in Cambridge, MA. The event was sponsored by the Harvard-Yenching Institute and coordinated by a number of its fellows. The conference brought together leading scholars and researchers in cyber studies, as well as social movement specialists in Asia. Together, the participants explored current studies in new media, cyber-activism, and social movements to better understand and theorize the relationship between internet-based activism and political developments. The participants came away from the conference with deeper understandings of the issue and new research agendas.

Panelists : Panelists included: Jing Wang, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Yukti Mukdawijitra University of Wisconsin; Penchan Phoborisut, University of Utah; Sudarat Musikawong, Siena College; Wahyu Dhyatmika, Harvard University; Pandit Chanrochanakit, Ramkhamhaeng University; Pinkaew Laungaramsri, Chiang Mai University.

Presentation Summaries: The conference included six research presentations as well as various discussions of the literature and future research areas. The following section will briefly summarize the research presented by the participants.

Presentation 1: *NGO2.0 and Social Media Praxis* by Jing Wang

In this presentation, Jing Wang discussed the impact of social media on activism and management by exploring the development of her own NGO projects in China. Wang suggests that social media is a crucial tool for civic engagement, especially in countries where NGOs and other civic organizations go ignored by the government—such as in China. Wang sees her work as anomalous for two reasons: (1) in China, her activism takes on the role of *non-confrontational activism* that does not directly challenge the state and (2) she focuses more on activism than academia.

Wang developed NGO2.0 to assist budding civic engagement groups (i.e. NGOs) that struggle to build efficacious platforms. She breaks down the needs of such groups into three categories: communication, technology, and resource needs. NGO2.0 links together NGOs with each other and with other resources through trainings, a horizontal learning platform, and other venues. One fascinating example of this platform is an interactive map that lists engaged groups across China to provide a means of interaction and collaboration. NGOs participating in the platform are evaluated every two years, with their assessments posted online.

Wang sees her work with NGO2.0 as a critical development in the world of social media and activism. But the development does not fit neatly in the traditional, Western model of activism and revolutions. Wang's vision of *non-confrontational activism* is part of a "grey area"—it is neither fully confrontational or ideal, but gradual in its work. Wang sees the work of NGO2.0 as a step in bettering societies where traditional, confrontational activism is not feasible. She also calls for a deeper study of such activism, arguing that the literature (and even our vocabularies) is overly focused on Western notions of "revolution" or "struggle."

Presentation 2: *Communities Reassembling: The Internet and the Assemblage of Hopes in Vietnam* by Yukti Mukdawijitra

In this presentation, Yukti Mukdawijitra explores the role of the internet and online communities in Vietnam's civil society. Yukti begins his presentation by asking two questions: (1) can the internet bring new hope for the Vietnamese? (2) To what extent does the internet facilitate reassembling? To explore these questions, Yukti presents the demographics and role of "netizens" in Vietnam, a nation in which 44% of citizens have access to the internet. Yukti then discusses the state's role in internet regulation, exploring how Vietnam monitors access and content, particularly on sensitive issues such as democracy, human rights, corruption, ethnic unrest, and pornography. He then explores more specific cases of state intervention, such as arrests stemming from internet activity.

After exploring these features of the internet in Vietnam, Yukti discusses the role of "civil online society." To do so, he explores examples in which communities have "reassembled" online, using the internet to fight against injustices and economic exploitation. Yukti demonstrates the breadth of these movements, using specific examples (such as anti-communist videos) to show the boldness of the online community in its organizing. Yukti closes by suggesting that the internet could create powerful changes in Vietnam's activism scene and pose new challenges to state power. Still, it remains to be seen exactly how these changes will occur and in what way the civil online community will develop.

Presentation 3: *Visualizing Thai Protests: "Self(ie)" Activism Against the 2014 Coup* by Penchan Phoborisut

In this presentation, Penchan explores visual and personal activism that appeared in the wake of the 2014 Thai Coup d'état. Penchan begins by giving a brief overview of the visual nature of the protests preceding the coup and how various groups were strongly associated by their visual identities—red, yellow, white, and multi-colored shirts. Penchan contextualizes the anti-coup protests as part of a changing landscape of activism in the digital area, typified by a lack of strong leaders, traditional speeches, and the rise of widespread participation through the web ("clicktivism").

Penchan characterizes the anti-coup movement as "self-initiated" and "rhizomatic," with "unruly bodies" challenging the junta on largely independent terms. She discusses the way leaders, such as Sombat Boonngamanong, created a trend in activism that others would then follow on their own. Penchan also points to the highly visual nature of the protests, honing in on thematic protests such as those derived from the *Hunger Games* imagery. Penchan terms these themed protests as "extralinguistic" conversations between society and institutions of power.

Penchan argues that the Thai anti-coup protests help open the gate for the study of a new generation of activists, and that more scholarship is needed. She also notes certain limitations to these studies, pointing to the secrecy involved with the function of platforms such as Facebook. She closes by suggesting further research evaluate the ability of such protests to make an impact outside of their immediate realm and off of the web.

Presentation 4: *Cyber Scout, Cyber Witch Hunt and the Rise of the Right Wing Movement in Post-Coup Thailand* by Pinkaew Laungmaramsi.

In this presentation, Pinkaew Laungmaramsi discusses various right wing internet movements that have precipitated in Thailand—particularly after the 2014 Thai Coup d'état. Pinkaew argues that there is a tendency in popular study to focus on social movements as progressive, missing the development of more militant, right wing groups. To demonstrate, Pinkaew discusses the rise of the *Cyber Scout* program in Thailand, originally developed by the government to

encourage citizens to rally against internet content (and content creators) seen as unsuitable. In particular, the platform was designed to challenge ideas seen as anti-royalist and against Thailand's nationalistic values.

Pinkaew traces the evolution of Cyber Scout and similar groups (as well as individual actors) into a large-scale online witch-hunt. Internet activists scour social media and other parts of the internet to create mass hate, scapegoating, and “patterned labeling.” This hostile movement has served to create fear within the online sphere and encourage self-censorship of ideas. Pinkaew next discusses the normalization of surveillance in post-coup Thailand. She asserts that that normalization has been driven by the domestication of surveillance as well as efforts to associate surveillance with “returning happiness” and other junta principles. Pinkaew highlights the danger of such normalization and the way it associates military surveillance with societal understandings of goodwill.

Presentation 5: *Anti-Monarchy Channels on YouTube* by Pandit Chanrochanakit

In this presentation, Pandit Chanrochanakit discusses the effect of internet freedom (or lack thereof) on political expression in Thailand—focusing on YouTube as a medium. Pandit discusses the tense nature of internet expression in Thailand and the deterioration of internet freedom after the 2014 Thai Coup d'état. Pandit discusses various junta efforts to curb internet expression, including Thailand's harsh lèse-majesté code (Article 112) and the Computer Related Crime Act B.E. 2550.

Presentation 6: *YouTube Subversive Repositories: Thailand Under Authoritarianisms* by Sudarat Musikawong

In this presentation, Sudarat Musikawong discusses the role of YouTube and other social media platforms in Thailand's activism scene. Sudarat begins by calling for scholars to rethink activism platforms and what makes them effective, arguing that social media functions as a medium to connect various elements of movements. Sudarat sees YouTube as a unique medium given its power to convey information, connect groups, and raise awareness of state activities and violence. She discusses that the use of YouTube by activists begs a variety of questions, including the way in which states and markets can use the platform as a tool of monitoring.

Sudarat next discusses the social media industry more broadly, highlighting the way in which various platforms—such as Google, Yahoo and YouTube—are converging on each other in form and function. She also brings to light that these platforms often censor material at the bequest of states. After, Sudarat demonstrates the power of YouTube to serve as a repository of evidence for state repression and a home for independent, dissident films. Sudarat concludes by evaluating the Thai junta's strategies for censoring the internet and calling for greater research into the structural, mechanical, and regulatory issues surrounding internet activism.