

Digital Media in Small Asian Emerging Democracies:

The Status Quo and Its Optimal Developmental Track

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Abstract

Digital media have played a pivotal role in accelerating the introduction of the six essential elements of democracy as identified by Democracy Reporting International (Meyer-Resende, 2011): the separation and balance of power, independence of the judiciary, a pluralist system of political parties and organisations, the rule of law, accountability and transparency, freedom of the media, respect for political rights. As an “information equalizer” in providing a borderless platform online for the participation of civil society, digital media have increased transparency in government, and brought about a better environment for social scrutiny.

To gain a deeper understanding of digital media’s process in democratisation, two small emerging democracies in Asia, Timor-Leste and Bhutan, were investigated for the roles of digital media in the democratisation process, challenges the media encountered, solutions were attempted to address the challenges, and problems that still linger.

Timor-Leste, a small state with the population around 1.2 million struggled to its independence in the 21st century and after 400 years of colonization by the Portuguese and 24 years of occupation by Indonesia, became a democracy in 2002. Its path to nation building was made more difficult by the deliberate destruction of its communication infrastructures by Indonesia, which meant recreating what it had previously out of ashes.

Bhutan, a small state being sandwiched between the world’s two most populous states—China and India—became a democracy when its fourth King abdicated and foisted democracy on its people deliberately in 2008. Bhutan’s case is special if not unique in terms of developing digital media. Internet and TV were only introduced in 1999. It has a small population of 750,000 spread over a mountainous terrain, which increases the difficulty in technology capacity building.

The two countries selected share common constraints of inadequate ICT infrastructures, low literacy rate at about 60% in Bhutan and 58.3% in Timor-Leste (UNICEF, 2013) respectively), low internet penetration, and the lack of regulatory bodies since they are emerging democracies at the transitional period. Digital media are also nascent.

The study concludes that there is no generic formula in building democracies. Digital media is only one factor among multiple ones that enable a functional democracy. Other contextual factors such as the literacy rate, the condition of communication infrastructure, and the size of media market in that particular country, which had been overlooked in previous literature, might restrict the extent to which digital media could play a democratizing role.

Keywords: democratization, digital media, small emerging democracies

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By some accounts, democracy as a preferred mode of state governance has arrived in waves (Huntington, 1991). The first long wave flowed from 1826 to 1926 followed by a reversal in 1942. The second wave began at the end of World War II, followed by a reversal in 1973 (Doorenspleet, 2000). In the “Third Wave” of democratization that occurred with the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, many small countries became democracies, at least in form. This democratic transition was across Latin America, Eastern Europe, East Asia and Africa (Voltmer, 2013).

Some scholars suggest that we are experiencing a “Fourth Wave” highlighted by the “Arab Spring” (Howard & Hussain, 2013). This Fourth Wave is marked by the use of digital media through providing extensive networks and organizing political actions via the Internet, mobile phones and social media on an unprecedented scale (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Digital media have played out differently across cultural contexts, geopolitical positions and historical stages, and their effects are contingent on whether the state in question is democratic or non-democratic (Gunther & Mughan, 2000).

Dramatic changes brought by digital media provide unprecedented space for freer expression. Digital media not only extend people’s participation in democracy, but they also provide spacious platform where the political-related information is widely available than any time in the past. In the context of Asian emerging democracies where the process of democratization is not a smooth or simple one, only a few countries have established functioning democracies with sound policies and democratic structure (Menocal, 2013). This paper attempts to investigate the role of digital media in two small and new Asian

democracies that face with similar constraints in the process of democratization, Bhutan and Timor-Leste.

Literature Review

In general, research concludes that the more people use digital media, the more likely they are to participate in politics (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2007). Judged by the theory of democracy, informed citizens are better citizens (Carpini & Keeter, 1997). Digital media, through increasing the capacity to participate in politics and public discourse, help citizens in becoming informed voters. Ergo, democracy is enhanced by digital media. Scholars (Bimber, Cunill, Copeland, & Gibson, 2015) also argued that digital media are positively and consistently associated with political talk, especially for those who have less interest in politics.

Research on the influences of digital media on democracy is mainly by academia in United States and United Kingdom (Anduiza, Jensen, & Jorba, 2012). Scholars (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Jorba & Bimber, 2012) advocated that more attention should be drawn to communities outside US as their experiences and lessons are so different from the one in more advanced countries.

Additionally, the contextual factors of the particular country are important in shaping the ways of how people involve online politically. Virtual activities online are deeply associated with actual life (Vaccari, 2012). The contextual elements comprise the demographic characteristics, the media economics, the cultural factors, and societal environment as a whole that could influence the process of democratization.

Generally, most developing countries have lower level of the Internet diffusion. It was found that significant political activities relied heavily on digital device such as the Arab

Spring happen in the countries that are amongst the lowest level of the Internet diffusion. The reason is partly because the Internet use is limited to a small group of people who are well-educated and among the segment of middle- or upper- class (Welp & Wheatley, 2012) and partly because the Internet users are not uniformly or evenly distributed. For example, those who live in rural areas with less access to the Internet are under-represented (Wilson, 2008). Certainly, Digital divides exist within as well as across countries (Jorba & Bimber, 2012). Criticism also targets on the homogenization of news content and extended marginalization of marginalized voices.

Digital media increasingly extend people's participation in democracy. Politically relevant information is widely available to people than ever before. Furthermore, digital media play a pivotal role in promoting democratization in small emerging democracies. Some researchers argued that emerging democracies benefited from starting late as they can leapfrog the long process that mature democracies underwent. On the one hand, media environment nowadays is so different from the one before digital age. On the other hand, digital media have not been put into full use because of the poor communication infrastructure in developing countries. Compounding the problem of underdeveloped facilities, such countries face problems from other societal sectors as well.

When an authoritarian or non-democratic regime fell and a new democracy arises, media are expected to play a pivotal role in affirming and consolidating the new regime. The radical social change may work as a catalytic agent that will exert special influence on media development of these countries. Being positioned in this transitional moment, media encounters challenges as well as chances.

Based on the previous knowledge of the relationship between digital media and democratization and fieldwork conducted in Bhutan and Timor-Leste, the authors

investigated (i) how the diffusion of digital media shaped and moulded their paths to democracy, (ii) what challenges both expected and unexpected they encountered, (iii) what measures were taken to address those challenges, and (iv) what structural problems still linger against the backdrop of rapidly growing digital media.

Methodology

A mixed methodology is employed in this research (Creswell, 2009). Constrained by the limited number of publications on Bhutan and Timor-Leste, the study intentionally relies heavily on in-depth interviews with media elites in different media industries and organizations. Supplementing the interviews were the secondary quantitative data including government documents and reports by international organizations.

Digital Media in Both Countries

As democracy requires time to take root, the fundamental shift in political regime cannot guarantee that the consolidation is completed automatically over one night (Menocal, 2013). In attempt to investigate whether digital media could shorten the procedure of becoming a functional democracy and what obstacles have been met, this study selected the newest emerging democracies in Asia—Bhutan and Timor-Leste. Both share similarities in terms of the special transitional stage as young democracies where dramatic social changes are witnessed in every societal sector. In addition, both are constrained by small geographic size, small media market, and insubstantial communication infrastructure.

Timor-Leste, a small state bordering Indonesia struggled to its independence in the 21st century. It experienced a 400-year of colonization of Portuguese and a 25-year occupation by Indonesian before finally gaining independence in 2002. Timor-Leste was ranked 68 in the Democracy Ranking 2014, while Bhutan was not listed in the Ranking (Campbell,

Pözlbauer, Barth, & Pözlbauer, 2014). The Democracy Ranking 2014 measures 112 countries by using more than 40 indicators. It shows the quality of democracy by comparing comprehensive dimensions. Timor-Leste is less economically advanced and more tied to the memory of past conflicts with both Asian and European masters.

Bhutan, on the other hand, has a completely different path to democracy. Being sandwiched between the two most populous states- China and India, Bhutan was a monarchy until its fourth King stepped down the throne and turned it to a democracy in 2008. Bhutan is known for its unique concept of happiness philosophy, as defined by the Centre for Bhutanese Studies (Ang & Cao, 2013). Bhutan is the newest democracy with the small population of about 700,000 (See Table 1).

Both Timor-Leste and Bhutan share similarities in their nascent democracy, their small geographic and demographic size, and the weak communication infrastructures that impede the role of digital media in advancing the process of democratization.

Table 1

General Introduction of Timor-Leste and Bhutan.

Country	Year of Independence	Location	Area (sq km)	Population	Press Freedom Ranking (2014)
Timor-Leste	2002	Maritime Southeast Asia	15,410	1,201,542	71
Bhutan	2008	South Asia	38,394	733,643	127

According to Timor-Leste Communication and Media Survey (Soares & Dooradi, 2011), the access to mobile phones was dramatically increased to 61% in 2011.¹ However, there was a significant regional variation between Dili, the capital city of Timor-Leste, and other distant towns. The biggest barrier in accessing mobile phones is the cost of service and phones.

The barriers of using the Internet were centered on the cost. People who could not afford their own computers will go to the Internet café instead. However, 64% of participants said that using the Internet café was costly (Soares & Dooradi, 2011). Although some could afford computers, they complained of the high costs of Internet connection. The result is that Internet use is 7%, far below the average percentage of that in Asian countries (Soares & Dooradi, 2011). According to the Global Internet Report, the Internet user penetration of Timor-Leste was 1.1% ranking at 179th out of 180 countries surveyed (ITU, 2013). The medium with the highest penetration in Timor-Leste is community radio (Soares & Dooradi, June 2011). It costs much less to access and does not require reading literacy the way the other media do.

Bhutan also has low Internet penetration. Only 23% of Bhutanese have access to the Internet, many of whom are the better educated segment of the population. Among these, only 5% used social media to discuss democracy related issues (MoIC, 2013). This figure is slightly different from the Global Internet Report that listed Bhutan at 113th out of 180 countries with the penetration at 29.9% (ITU, 2013). Another contributor to the low online participation is the literacy rate. The total adult literacy rate in Timor-Leste is 58.3% from 2008 to 2012, while Bhutan has a worse rate at 52.8% (UNICEF, 2013).

The Under-developed Infrastructure

¹ This is the latest report we could get access to.

Diffusion of technologies in most emerging democracies is slowed down by the inadequate infrastructure and lack of professional capacity (Jorba & Bimber, 2012). Timor-Leste and Bhutan are ranked at 155 and 148 out of 230 countries in the world in GDP per capita² of \$6,800 and \$7,700 respectively (CIA, 2014). In Timor-Leste's case, the prolonged history of conflicts damaged its communication infrastructure and in many instances needed to be built literally from the ground up. The poor road condition and half-completed constructions witnessed in the August 2014 fieldwork reflected the overall fragile economic conditions. Community radios, which had been created by NGOs during the days right after the Indonesians left, are still popular in rural areas outside Dili.

In telecommunications, Timor Telecom (TT), owned by Portugal Telecom International (PTI), was the monopoly operator until 2012. TT was literally built from nothing in 2002 and granted an exclusive license from 2002 to 2017 before two new operators (Telin – Telecommunication Indonesia International, and Vittel - Vietnam telecommunication) entered the market and broke the monopoly in 2013 (Budde, 2014; Silva, 2010).

The price of mobile service and the Internet access is expensive related to the average income of people and the cost in other countries. For example, TT charged \$500 activation fee and \$500 monthly fee for 64 Kbps (Silva, 2010). And this is against a backdrop of inconsistent electricity supply. The average salary is less than \$250/month. The government is in the process of establishing regulatory authorities to regulate the telecom market. Additionally, it is difficult to obtain official figures of telecom sectors. Based on our observation in fieldwork, the recent history of unrest still has a negative impact on building people's sense of security and belongings that are necessary in advancing democratization. Consequently, it causes some uncertainty in developing the media market.

² This entry shows GDP per capita on a purchasing power parity basis as of 1 July for the same year.

In Bhutan, although Community Information Centers were established in the rural areas, respondents apparently did not know that the Internet was available for them (MoIC, 2013). The implication is that other measures such as education of Internet use and effectiveness of public facilities should be supplemented when applying the new technology.

Language Barrier

For small countries, especially whose national language is different from the larger neighboring countries, the distinctive language is another barrier for digital diffusion. Timor-Leste has four languages in the constitution. English and Bahasa Indonesian are used as working languages; Portuguese and Tetum are used as official languages. Portuguese is usually used in some formal circumstances. The locals mainly use Tetum. The diversity of languages in Bhutan is largely decided by the geographic features. The national language is Dzongkha. English is the medium language in school instructions. The boundaries created by languages reflect on the restricted communication in the global public sphere resulting in insufficient political participation online.

Unevenly Distributed Resources

As questioned by some scholars, the unrepresentativeness of digital media is another issue in small emerging democracies (Wilson, 2008). Digital divide is more evident in this type of countries because of late acceptance of the Internet and underdeveloped economics.

Digital divide can either operate at a micro or a macro level (Welp & Wheatley, 2012). At a micro level, digital divide appears as the possibility of accessing the Internet between a small group of elites who are highly educated and have possessed social resources and political powers and ordinary citizens who are less educated and have limited social resource. The middle or upper-class segment of the population who has more discourse power cannot represent the majority of population either online or offline. But the fact is the small group of

elites enjoys more right of expression than the others do, although everyone is equally entitled the right in the constitution. In this sense, what happens to the traditional media could also happen to the digital media. The minority has more difficulties in letting their voices heard via digital media that require more knowledge and skills. This actually turns away more people with less command of new technology.

The Implications for Digital Media in the Context at the Transitional Stage

Some scholars argue that in terms of using digital media in advancing democratization, emerging democracies can take advantage of late development by learning the experiences from matured democracies, but it largely simplifies the premise of in what context and under what conditions the role of digital media can be fully played out. Thus, this study concentrates on the context where digital media play the role.

Small Media Size

Both Timorese and Bhutanese media are marked by their small size. From the perspective of media economics, the inevitable disadvantage in press media is the high first-copy cost. However, this mostly happens in press media where high first-copy cost might be a big burden for reproduction. Therefore, Vucinic (2014) suggested that private newspapers “go digital” to avoid market failure and expensive delivery cost. But the fact is there will be a digital divide based on the low literacy rate in both countries. The diseconomies of scale of small market would suggest that if market failure is inevitable, policymakers must take corrective countermeasures. Such an intervention, however, raises questions as to the extent that the media can play its role in promoting democracy.

Multiple Challenges Faced

Emerging democracies are more likely to encounter tricky problems in political stability, economic sustainability and the inadequate understanding of democracy and democratic values among its citizens. Being positioned in this transitional moment, media encounters challenges as well as chances.

From the legislative level, it is understandable that although the old regime can be overthrown over one night, it always takes years for new democracies to put media laws and regulations into place. As Voltmer (2013) stated: “normalization’ is a matter of time”. Law making will fail to keep pace with developments in the democratic transition because of the many issues all crying for attention. So even though digital media is expected to provide greater opportunity for public participation and political discourse, the guarantee from the law may not always be in place (Diamond, Plattner, & Chu, 2013). Inevitably, there will a period of media operating in a “lawless vacuum” where the old non-democratic rules are swept aside and media are left to function in an unregulated and insecure regulatory environment (Voltmer, 2013). This is especially witnessed in the case of Timor-Leste and Bhutan where the legislation on digital media have not been put into place.

As for the legacy of the past, people inevitably carry with old habits and legacy unconsciously and cast them in daily work simultaneously. The mentality could not be easily changed on the day when democracy was established. The old elites immediately reappeared with a new title but the existing institutions were rarely fundamentally restructured when regime changed (Voltmer, 2013). The degree of understanding the features of democracy will influence the implementation of policies. If the legislation on digital media in Timor-Leste and Bhutan could be put into place in the near future, it requires the effective implementation to guarantee the countries are on the right track. Otherwise, there will be a gap between what the country is supposed to be and what the country is.

Conclusion

The process of democratization depends on multiple factors and the digital media is only one element. Without considering the contextual factors that shape the society, the intention of making full use of digital media in enlarging the platform of public discourse and promoting democracy to a higher level might fail. There is no generic formula for democratization. To what extent the role digital media plays out is restricted to the literacy rate, the condition of communication infrastructure, the mindset of people, and the size of that particular country. The lack of media legislation and the lack of independent media regulators also contribute to the ineffectiveness of digital media in enabling social regime change.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study is a part of research on media policy in small emerging democracies, therefore the vision used in this paper might be limited to issues regarding the shape of future media regulations and policy implementation. Additionally, this paper is limited to two small emerging democracies in Asia Pacific region and the experiences might not necessarily be applicable in other regions. The difficulty in accessing the official statistics of the telecom sectors reduces the accuracy of numbers. There is a need to confirm the figures when doing future study. As this is largely based on in-depth interviews and second-hand data retrieved online or from our contacts in both countries, some data is not that up to date.

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