Towards a More Inclusive Digital Democracy in Asia: Introduction to the Digital Democracy Special Issue of *Asiascape: Digital Asia*

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Abstract

This article provides an introduction to the *Asiascape: Digital Asia* special issue on digital democracy. It provides readers with a brief overview of literature that deals with digital democracy and marginalized groups online, followed by an overview of the contributions that make up this issue. It argues that democracy is only as strong as the voices on its margins, and it calls for deeper reflection about how we can create more inclusive models of digital democracy in Asia and beyond.

Keywords

Bangladesh – digital democracy – inclusion – India – Korea – marginalized groups – Myanmar

Media historians, including Gitelman and Pingree (2003), point out that every time a new medium of communication emerges, claims are invariably made that it will help build ‘real democracy’. Continuing in this pattern, the early literature on the role of the internet in political life was largely hopeful. Various terms – such as e-democracy, cyberdemocracy, and digital democracy – were coined to highlight the potential of online technology to improve government performance (e.g. Hague and Loader 1999), to better gauge public opinion (e.g. Smith & Macintosh 2003), and to strengthen communities (e.g. Rheingold 2000; Wellman & Gulia 1997).

As the technology has matured and more research has been conducted outside North America and Western Europe (where initial discussions were concentrated), the literature has further diversified, directing increasing attention to how digital democracy in different parts of the world is shaped by differing contextual factors, such as the pre-existing level of democratic and economic development, institutional dynamics, and overall political culture in a given society (e.g. Anstead & Chadwick 2008; Ducke 2004; Goggin & McLelland 2008; Lee 2009; Miller & Vaccari 2020).

The Asian region bought into the promise of digital efficiency and empowerment as early as in the 1990s (Banerjee 2003; Ho et al. 2003), exemplified by a wave of e-government projects, such as Malaysia's Electronic Government Initiative (1997), South Korea's Cyber Korea 21 (1999), Singapore's e-Government Action Plan (2000), and India's National e-Governance Plan (2006). These initiatives, and similar ones launched across the region, have in common that they have been built upon the idea of neatly bounded nation-states and citizenries. According to Freedom on the Net, an annual global survey of digital rights, published since 2011 by the international human rights watchdog Freedom House, most of the Asian countries surveyed are marked by a significant disparity in access that parallels nationality, gender, ethnicity, and urban-rural divides (Shahbaz & Funk 2020).

Against this backdrop, four articles in this special issue demonstrate that various groups tend to fall outside the existing social imaginary of 'digital democracy' in Asia, such as immigrants, refugees, and religious minorities.

The first article, by Iris Lim, concerns South Korea, a country in which an estimated 99.75 percent of households have internet access and the number of smartphone subscribers, 52.5 million, surpasses its entire population, 51.8 million, as of April 2021 (Korean Ministry of Science and ICT 2021). In such surroundings, it is easy to assume that no particular group is disenfranchised. However, Lim's ethnographic account of how migrant workers experience the country's e-government platforms and services sheds light on a range of barriers faced by those workers, which are often linked to how they are identified in administrative systems.

Next, Anubha Singh discusses 'Digital India', the Indian government's flagship campaign launched in 2015, which promises to empower its citizens through technological innovations, such as agriculture-related mobile applications. Based on a feminist critical discourse analysis of its website, Singh points out that the campaign envisions a culturally monolithic society at the risk of suppressing the diversity and complexity of India.

In the following article, Faheem Hussain and Yenn Lee take the reader to the borderlands between Myanmar and Bangladesh, where more than 800,000

Rohingya Muslims have fled religious persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and have sought asylum in neighbouring Bangladesh since August 2017. The authors, drawing on their multi-year engagement with Rohingya refugees and humanitarian organizations on the ground, highlight a 'mismatch' between the host country's refugee policy and the Rohingya community's everyday life in the camps with regard to digital access.

The last article in the issue is written by Farrah Sheikh about Korea to examine what the media dubbed 'Korea's first refugee crisis' in 2018. At that time, approximately 500 Yemeni refugees, predominantly male and Muslim, arrived on the island of Jeju, the country's southernmost territory, which has over 600,000 residents and a visa waiver programme for tourists. According to Sheikh, the arrival of this relatively modest number of refugees revealed the country's deep-seated racism. She draws our attention in particular to the parallel between the anti-refugee rhetoric observed in Europe around the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015 and employed for effect in Korean cyberspace in 2018.

With these four contributions, this special issue shows that people who are on the move or caught between the boundaries of nation-states are often forgotten in policy-level discussions about digital access and participation. The collection provides evidence that democracy is only as strong as the voices on its margins, calling for deeper reflection about how we can create more inclusive models of digital democracy in Asia and beyond.

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