Andrew Kenyon, Tim Majorbanks & Andrew Whiting (eds.)


One of the problems with edited collections is that they are very much the sum of their parts, with the consequence that the quality of the contributions can vary significantly. In addition, the cohesiveness of the material is often fairly loose, requiring the editors to impose some kind of overarching theoretical or methodological framework over the collection as a whole, usually in an appropriately structured introductory chapter. When this is done well such collections can provide a notable impact on academic debate, particularly when they draw upon a wide range of expertise and especially when that expertise is multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary.

*Democracy, Media and Law in Malaysia and Singapore: A Space for Speech*, edited by Andrew Kenyon, Tim Majorbanks and Andrew Whiting, provides a good example of the pros and cons of such an enterprise. The goal of the collective endeavour grew out of a research project funded by the Australian Research Council between 2006-2010, which sought to examine key aspects of the political and legal regulation of both mainstream and alternative/digital media in Malaysia and Singapore by bringing together scholars from Communication Studies, Law and Political Science. The result, however, is a collection of essays that are far from uniform in quality, and that collectively really do not hold together particularly well.

However, perhaps the main weakness of the volume is that much of the work is really quite dated. While the workshop from which the volume emerged took place in 2010, there is no reason why this should have necessarily meant that in the production of the finished project the authors could not have rewritten sections of their work in light of subsequent developments in Malaysia and Singapore. In the Malaysian cases, for reasons not given, this was not done. Indeed, what is all the more surprising is that the editors explicitly acknowledge this in their introduction by stating that these chapters ‘describe and analyze events and issues that took place under the old regime of media regulation. And as such, reference to laws and policies concerning the media is to those rules as they were on or before 2011’ (2). No explanation is given for why this should be the case, but, as a consequence, much of the material in the Malaysian case examples are by now relatively well-established with little added that is particularly new. The chapter by Steele for example, while a very interesting specific local example of citizen journalism, is based on interviews that are five years old. Similarly, the Gomez and Leong chapter examines the 2006 and 2008 general elections in Singapore and Malaysia, yet both countries
have had subsequent elections, elections that are simply dismissed as being ‘beyond the scope of this chapter’ (182). This is especially problematic because the nature of alternative media use in the 2011 and 2013 Singaporean and Malaysian elections, respectively, evolved rather dynamically from the earlier ones that are the focus of their study. For example, while it is true that political bloggers were extremely important and influential in the 2008 Malaysian general election, their role diminished sharply five years later. Instead, social media use and social networking sites became a much more visible and prominent tool. Many of the examples of pioneering citizen journalism in Malaysia are relatively old and the significance of bloggers is overstated. Equally, many of the Malaysian case examples are by now relatively well established (e.g. Steele 2009; Tan & Zawawi 2008) and thus add little that is new.

While digital media is discussed in both countries, digital media has moved on, with online social networking, and Facebook and Twitter in particular, becoming increasingly important. Despite this, there is little mention in this volume of either. Facebook is mentioned on only eight pages, while Twitter barely gets a mention at all, registering only three pages.

Looking at the volume as a whole, it is difficult to discern what the overall framework of the collection is. It is neither a volume on Law, nor on Communication Studies, nor on Political Science. The book is a useful resource on the regulatory framework found in each country and how that framework effects, limits and shapes the nature of political discourse in both countries. For those unfamiliar with the way these semi-authoritarian regimes have used a ‘menu of manipulation’ to control the media this collection will be of interest.

In addition, there are a number of strong chapters, of which the one by Amanda Whiting and Tim Majorbanks on the impact that the fear of defamation has on media practitioners stands out. This chapter was particularly strong methodologically; in fact, it was one of the few chapters that contained an explicit methodological statement and used its qualitative interviews of media practitioners and lawyers in both countries to investigate how these individuals felt the legal framework affected the way they practiced their profession. This issue of so-called self-censorship is one that is often commented on in the literature, but is one that is relatively under researched. To this end, the Whiting and Majorbanks study is useful. Again, however, the interview data was conducted in 2008, raising the obvious question about the validity of the results given changes in the political and regulatory environment in both countries. For example, since 2008, while the Malaysian government has reformed some legal restrictions it has also wielded the Sedition Act far more liberally against many of its opponents.