

**DEMOCRACY DISCONNECTED:  
SOCIAL MEDIA'S CAUSTIC  
INFLUENCE ON SOUTHEAST  
ASIA'S FRAGILE REPUBLICS**

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# DEMOCRACY DISCONNECTED: SOCIAL MEDIA'S CAUSTIC INFLUENCE ON SOUTHEAST ASIA'S FRAGILE REPUBLICS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contrary to once idealistic expectations that social media would usher in a new era of unity and democratization, technology's empowerment of the masses seems to have engendered societies in which people are more isolated and polarized than ever before. Southeast Asia serves as a particularly interesting case study on the pernicious effects that social media has exerted on the political environment. In the absence of moderating influences such as a strong education system, well-developed legal framework, and robust, independent media, rumors and falsehoods have spread largely unimpeded online. Such disinformation has stoked long-standing communal conflicts and provided an opportunity for domestic and foreign actors alike to stymie and potentially reverse democratic gains. These detrimental effects on fragile democracies along China's periphery threaten to erode Washington's influence in the region, which in turn is likely to have more far-reaching effects.

Southeast Asia is poised to be the fastest growing internet market in the world by 2020. The vast majority of people in the region access the internet using their mobile phones, a development made possible by a combination of favorable policies and technological advances that have sharply reduced the costs of cellular communications for consumers. Facebook in particular has become the social media platform of choice for many living in Southeast Asia, largely owing to the fact that it has been adapted to operate on the low-end feature phones that are prevalent in more impoverished countries.

The ubiquity of social media alone, however, does not account for its outsized influence. Such online communication platforms have contributed to the acceleration of information flows characteristic of our modern era. The ambiguity arising from this deluge of information challenges the basic human propensity to minimize uncertainty. Mental shortcuts that individuals rely on to aid their decisionmaking can make them more susceptible to the disinformation that they are routinely exposed to. Compounding this problem, the increasing personalization of the internet limits the scope of knowledge

that people receive, often making them unaware of facts that might provide them with a more complete understanding of a given issue, while segregating them into virtual communities of likeminded individuals that can wield influence over their behavior. Individual tolerance of ambiguity exists on a spectrum, and some people are more inclined to rush to judgment to allay their discomfort with uncertainty, making them targets for actors who seek to persuade their thinking.

In Southeast Asia, such behavioral manipulation has occurred at the grassroots level as charismatic leaders and groups have taken to social media to spread hate speech and fake news with the intent of gaining adherents to their cause in long-running communal conflicts that threaten democratic consolidation. At the same time, a couple of prominent, democratically-elected strongman leaders in the region have also taken advantage of social media's persuasive power to undergird their rule as they simultaneously seek to silence the professional media organizations that pose a challenge to their carefully curated narratives.

Continued technological innovations portend a future in which it will be even more difficult to discern the truth of information shared online. Attempts to curtail the spread of disinformation through legal and technological means are likely to prove ineffective given the politicization of institutions in the region and the exponential rise in the amount of information shared online. Rather, efforts should be taken to make populations more resistant to the siren song of disinformation. Through education and the rebuilding of physical communities, individuals can become more comfortable living in a complex and nuanced world.

## PREFACE: UTOPIA LOST

While the 20th century was marked by an extraordinary array of technological achievements that helped to bring the world closer together, perhaps none have so fundamentally altered our collective conscience as those associated with the dawn of the information age. The emergence of the internet brought with it the promise of unprecedented connectivity, allowing individuals to gain access to knowledge that transcends cultural and geographic boundaries. This revolution in the dissemination of information coincided with a general optimism that the free flow of ideas would usher in an era of greater egalitarianism and freedom. For societies that had long suffered under the strictures of authoritarian rule, a multitude of innovative tools would empower once oppressed citizenries to mobilize against despots and demand the institutionalization of governments accountable to their people.

For a time, this idealistic vision seemed on the verge of becoming a reality as companies such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter rose to prominence in the global lexicon. The exuberance surrounding technology's role in bringing about a new wave of democratic development hit a fever pitch in 2009 after protestors first filled the streets of Moldova in response to perceived fraud in parliamentary elections. Dubbed the "Twitter Revolution" because of the role the platform played in publicizing the demonstrations, social media took center stage as it was subsequently employed in high-profile protests in Iran and across the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Fast forward several years to the present, however, and the technology-fueled popular uprisings in these countries have seemingly resulted in few, if any, discernable reforms. In fact, societies across the globe bear little resemblance to the once utopian prospect of a world defined by greater understanding, empathy, and unity. Rather, we seem to be more isolated and polarized than ever before.

Southeast Asia provides a particularly interesting and important present-day case study on technology's utility as a catalyst for democratization. The relatively sudden and rapid spread of cellular devices in the region, where Asia's most tenuous democracies are concentrated, has conferred a significant amount of power to the masses at a time when still-nascent institutions are weak. While more and more people are taking to social media, especially Facebook, to propagate their views, there are few mediating influences over the growing cacophony of voices, giving rise to an increasingly rancorous political climate. Absent a strong education system, well-developed legal framework, and robust, independent media, unbridled rumors and falsehoods threaten to undermine civil discourse as they spread through the burgeoning social media landscape. This situation presents an opportunity for domestic and foreign actors alike who seek to leverage the discord to pursue ends that may stymie, or even reverse, progress toward consolidating democratic gains.

Washington has reason to pay close attention to what is transpiring in these countries if only because the United States has itself proven vulnerable to the effects of social media-induced polarization. There is mounting concern that even well-established democracies are susceptible to so-called "sharp power" tactics employed by China and Russia that are aimed at exploiting the open media culture within democratic societies to foment corrosive public divisions.<sup>2</sup> However, increasing levels of polarization and

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1 Evgeny Morozov, "Moldova's Twitter Revolution," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/04/07/moldovas-twitter-revolution/>.

2 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

social media-influenced conflict in Southeast Asian countries also present a direct threat to the U.S. national interest. The detrimental effects of these conditions on fragile democracies along China's periphery portend a weakening of Washington's influence in this strategically important region, which is likely to have more far-reaching effects.

To fully appreciate social media's growing political clout in Southeast Asia, it is important to begin by exploring the peculiar combination of circumstances that have helped to facilitate its pervasiveness. The ubiquity of social media alone, however, does not account for its outsized role in influencing attitudes. It is, therefore, instructive to briefly examine the underlying psychological processes that have made social media a particularly persuasive form of communication. After gaining a better understanding of the interplay between human factors and our complex information ecosystem, it is then possible to more clearly see how individuals and groups in the region are leveraging this relationship to their advantage as they seek to drive national-level politics in a direction favorable to their interests. This study will conclude by extrapolating current trends to see how further technological developments may pose future threats to Southeast Asia's still-developing democracies and what actions, if any, can be taken to mitigate the political vulnerabilities that are an inevitable byproduct of an increasingly interconnected global community.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA COMES ONLINE

For several of Asia's most economically developed, consolidated democracies, social media has proven itself in recent years to be a political mainstay. The power of social media was on full display in 2014 when students in Taiwan used various platforms to organize demonstrations in response to the rapid passage of a cross-Strait trade pact that culminated in a weeks-long occupation of the island's legislature.<sup>3</sup> The tactics employed in Taiwan's "Sunflower Movement" served as a model for emulation by youth in Hong Kong several months later during pro-democracy demonstrations that garnered international attention.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, social media platforms have been utilized to help organize massive anti-nuclear demonstrations in Japan and anti-corruption protests in South Korea.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising that technological tools have been widely adopted in these locations, which are among the most connected places on the planet.<sup>6</sup> However, that social media has become such an influential force in many underdeveloped Southeast Asian countries marked by weak infrastructure seems, on its face, paradoxical. In fact, this impediment has actually provided fertile ground for the rapid development of mobile connectivity.

Southeast Asia has witnessed remarkable growth in mobile internet usage in recent years and it is now poised to be the fastest growing internet market in the world through 2020. The region is estimated to have approximately 330 million internet users, an

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3 Vincent Y. Chao, "How Technology Revolutionized Taiwan's Sunflower Movement," *The Diplomat*, April 15, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/how-technology-revolutionized-taiwans-sunflower-movement>.

4 Jeff Chu and Helsa Chan, "5 Ways Protesters Organized #OccupyCentral," *Fast Company*, September 29, 2014, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3036374/5-ways-protesters-organized-occupycentral>.

5 Justin McCurry, "Japan's Largest Anti-Nuke Protest in Decades," *Public Radio International*, July 16, 2012, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-07-16/japans-largest-anti-nuke-protest-decades>; Ha-Joon Chang, "South Koreans Worked a Democratic Miracle. Can They Do It Again?" *The New York Times*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/opinion/south-korea-social-mobility.html>.

6 "Measuring the Information Society Report 2017," (Geneva: International Telecommunication Union, 2017), <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/mis2017.aspx>.

increase of 50 million from 2015, more than 90 percent of whom access the internet on mobile phones.<sup>7</sup> The rapid development of mobile telecommunications infrastructure in the region can largely be attributed to geography. In maritime countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, the prohibitively high cost of laying land lines across a disparate landmass has fueled the adoption of cellular towers and mobile devices. However, even for contiguous mainland countries, rugged terrain and remote populations have led to a leapfrogging of traditional wired connectivity in favor of cellular and satellite communications.<sup>8</sup>

Besides these topographic considerations, deregulation has also been a boon to the telecommunications industry. The liberalization of the rules governing commerce commensurate with political reform in several Southeast Asian countries has enabled foreign investors to gain a stake in an increasingly lucrative market. This phenomenon was especially dramatic in Myanmar following the nominally civilian government's decision in 2014 to relax restrictions on the telecom industry, opening the door to outside investment.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the country's mobile penetration rate rivaled that of North Korea at the end of junta rule in 2011, it has since skyrocketed to over 100 percent of the population, a statistic accounted for by some individuals having multiple phones.<sup>10</sup>

This rapid expansion of the region's cellular infrastructure would not have facilitated widespread internet usage had it not been for several key factors that have drastically reduced the costs of access for consumers. One of these elements has been a flood of cheap, low-end mobile devices (called feature phones) from manufacturers in China and South Korea that have put internet-enabled phones in the hands of relatively impoverished consumers in these still-developing countries.<sup>11</sup> Even more noteworthy has been the drastic reduction in the price of the mobile SIM cards that are necessary to connect these devices to the cellular network. Again, Myanmar serves as a striking example of the effects of such developments. SIM cards, which once cost thousands of dollars to purchase prior to the beginning of the country's transition to democratic rule in 2011, have since plummeted in price to under a couple of dollars.<sup>12</sup> The same is true for countries across the region, where inexpensive prepaid SIM cards have poured into the market and are widely available for purchase.<sup>13</sup>

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7 Rajan Anandan and Rohit Siphimalani, "330 Million Internet Users Accelerating the Growth of Southeast Asia's Internet Economy," *Google*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.blog.google/topics/google-asia/sea-internet-economy/>.

8 "The Great Leap Forward: ASEAN's Telecoms Market is Set to Boom as Mobile Overtakes Fixed Lines," Spire Research & Consulting, <https://www.spireresearch.com/spire-journal/2006-2/q3/the-great-leap-forward-aseans-telecoms-market-is-set-to-boom-as-mobile-overtakes-fixed-lines/>.

9 Philip Heijmans, "Big Year for Myanmar Economic Reforms," *The Diplomat*, January 28, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/big-year-for-myanmar-economic-reforms/>.

10 Motokazu Matsui, "Mobile Revolution Lifts Myanmar out of Telecom Time Warp," *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 26, 2016, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Trends/Mobile-revolution-lifts-Myanmar-out-of-telecom-time-warp?page=1>; "DataBank – World Development Indicators: Myanmar," The World Bank Group, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=MMR&series=&period=>; "Digital in 2018 in Southeast Asia Part 1 – North-West," We Are Social, <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-southeast-asia-part-1-northwest-86866386>.

11 Business Insider Intelligence, "Opportunities Arise in Southeast Asian Smartphone Market," *Business Insider*, September 2, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/opportunities-arise-in-southeast-asian-smartphone-market-2016-9>; Vindu Goel, "For Developing World, a Streamlined Facebook," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/technology/for-developing-world-a-lightweight-facebook.html>.

12 "Freedom on the Net 2017 – Country Profile: Myanmar," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/myanmar>.

13 Tan Hui Yee, "Regional Govts Clamp Down on Prepaid SIM Cards," *The Straits Times*, July 31, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/regional-govts-clamp-down-on-prepaid-sim-cards>.

Facebook in particular has gained widespread favor as the social media platform of choice for many living in Southeast Asia. The company's entry into the market was largely made possible by its partnership with the Israeli startup Snaptu, which it acquired in 2011. Facebook relied on Snaptu's technology to make its platform operable on the basic feature phones that are prevalent in more impoverished countries.<sup>14</sup> Using a streamlined app, individuals are provided with the basic functionality of Facebook, but in such a way that data usage and the associated costs are minimized. Facebook's availability in a multitude of languages, including several of the more esoteric dialects spoken in the region, has also contributed to its mass appeal.<sup>15</sup> While some local-language social media sites have emerged in recent years, such as MyMingalarbar in Myanmar and Pantip in Thailand, they are not used at the same scale as Facebook. Consequently, for many people in Southeast Asia today, Facebook essentially is the internet.<sup>16</sup>

Another consequential factor that has helped facilitate Facebook's penetration in the region stems from a controversial program with ostensibly altruistic intentions. In August 2013, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg publicly announced the launch of Internet.org, an initiative among several large technology firms to provide low-cost basic internet service to the approximately two-thirds of the world's population for whom online access is prohibitively expensive.<sup>17</sup> The program essentially functions as a partnership between Facebook and local internet service providers in select underdeveloped countries around the world. Within Southeast Asia, Internet.org is currently collaborating with telecoms in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.<sup>18</sup> Service subscribers are able to access Facebook and a limited number of partner websites that provide information on essential issues such as health, employment, and education through an application called "Free Basics" without being charged for data usage, a practice known as "zero rating."<sup>19</sup>

While the stated intention of the Free Basics program may be to improve the livelihoods of the world's underprivileged by expanding their access to information, it has restricted the breadth of knowledge they receive on the basis of what they can afford to pay, effectively segregating them from the general internet population. In addition, Free Basics has drawn fierce criticism from supporters of net neutrality, who argue that the program serves as a form of "digital colonialism" because it provides users with deliberately curated Western corporate content, all the while harvesting vast amounts of their data.<sup>20</sup> Free Basics garnered further negative publicity worldwide following India's decision in 2016 to ban the program after its regulators determined that it had led to the levy of discriminatory charges on the basis of content. While Free Basics users

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14 Charles Arthur, "Facebook Buys Mobile Startup Snaptu," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/mar/21/facebook-buys-snaptu>.

15 Jessica Guynn, "Does Facebook Speak Your Language?" *USA Today*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/09/29/facebook-translation-new-languages-corsican-fulah-malta/91268284/>.

16 James Massola, "Facebook is the Internet for Many People in South-East Asia," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/facebook-is-the-internet-for-many-people-in-south-east-asia-20180322-p4z5nu.html>.

17 Stan Schroeder, "Zuckerberg Wants to Bring the Whole Planet Internet Access," *Mashable*, August 21, 2013, <https://mashable.com/2013/08/21/mark-zuckerberg-internet-org/#uGbjazSRDGqq>.

18 "Where We've Launched," Internet.org by Facebook, <https://info.internet.org/en/story/where-weve-launched/>.

19 Devin Coldewey, "WTF is Zero Rating?" *Tech Crunch*, April 16, 2017, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/04/16/wtf-is-zero-rating/>.

20 Olivia Solon, "'It's Digital Colonialism': How Facebook's Free Internet Service Has Failed its Users," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/27/facebook-free-basics-developing-markets>.

are limited to what they can see on the internet, those individuals from higher socio-economic classes who can afford to pay for data enjoy unfettered access to information and, by extension, a privileged position from which to engage in political debate.<sup>21</sup>

The potential dangers associated with restricting one's knowledge of the world to the information garnered through social media should be all too apparent. In recent years, stories about the increasingly contemptible state of online discourse have dominated international news, as have headlines about how various online platforms have been weaponized in an effort to sway election outcomes.<sup>22</sup> The anonymity afforded to social media users has proven to be both a blessing and a curse. While it has, at times, provided a relatively safe space for pro-democracy advocates to organize outside the gaze of an omniscient authoritarian regime, it also obscures the veracity of the information shared online by concealing its source. This issue is further compounded when taking into account the problem that social media lends itself to the creation of echo chambers because of the self-selective nature of the medium. Nevertheless, despite the perils of this modern form of communication, many of which are well known to its users, it maintains a seemingly irresistible allure. In order to fully appreciate the magnitude of social media's sway, it's worth taking a moment to examine the psychological and societal influences that lend the medium its influence.

## SOCIAL MEDIA'S PERSUASIVE POWER

The sheer volume of information that social media exposes individuals to may form the basis of its polarizing effects. To better understand why, consider how changes in the broader information environment have affected human psychology from an evolutionary perspective. For most of the time that we humans have inhabited the Earth, our exposure to knowledge has been relatively limited. In fact, written language, arguably one of humankind's most important inventions, only began to emerge some 5,000 years ago.<sup>23</sup> Even then, the mass circulation of written materials was not possible until the development of the printing press within the last millennium. It was only in the first half of the 20th century that mass communication in the form of broadcast media began to emerge. Technological developments, particularly in the form of satellite communications and fiber optics, were the principal catalysts responsible for the acceleration of information flows that have since become the hallmark of our modern era. Whereas the news that people received for much of human history was hyperlocal in scope, it is only within the last half-century that the near-instantaneous transmission of information has put the world at our fingertips.

We now find ourselves inundated with a veritable flood of data that we are cognitively ill-equipped to process. The author Alvin Toffler famously forewarned of such a predicament in his 1970 book *Future Shock*, in which he popularized the phrase "information overload" to describe how a glut of data can overwhelm our relatively limited cognitive processing capacity.<sup>24</sup> In recent years, a number of enterprising technological firms have arisen to profit from our human craving for knowledge and social connection. However,

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21 Rajat Agrawal, "Why India Rejected Facebook's 'Free' Version of the Internet," *Mashable*, February 9, 2016, <https://mashable.com/2016/02/09/why-facebook-free-basics-failed-india/#7Ar1KFyXmuqU>.

22 Yasmeen Serhan, "Italy Scrambles to Fight Misinformation Ahead of Its Elections," *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/europe-fake-news/551972/>.

23 Heather Whipps, "How Writing Changed the World," *Live Science*, February 10, 2008, <https://www.livescience.com/2283-writing-changed-world.html>.

24 Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

in catering to our desires, they have contributed to an epidemic of “infobesity” that has left many people feeling overwhelmed, agitated, and alone.<sup>25</sup>

There is a growing body of research that explores the human response to ambiguity. As a species, humans have a natural propensity to try to quickly make sense of the world.<sup>26</sup> The psychologist Jerome Kagan in a paper published in 1972 argued that uncertainty reduction is a primary driver of human behavior.<sup>27</sup> We have, therefore, come to rely on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, that we use to aid our decisionmaking.<sup>28</sup> While mental heuristics have proven to be an evolutionary advantage, spurring us to rapid action in response to often obscure dangers in our surroundings, they also contribute to certain biases that can negatively impact our ability to objectively analyze a given situation. Unfortunately, these cognitive fallacies are roused by the very nature of social media, which presents individuals with a barrage of information often intentionally culled by inexperienced sources that can blur the boundary between fact and fiction.

Of all the mental pitfalls most likely to ensnare the unsuspecting consumer of social media, the availability heuristic may be one of the most insidious. People have a tendency to assign greater importance to information that is prevalent in their environment. The ease with which one can recall certain knowledge can lead an individual to overvalue its significance when making decisions that take that information into account.<sup>29</sup> When we assume an active role in deliberately choosing which content on social media we pay attention to, we are at risk of assigning greater weight to the information we are routinely presented with. As long as we are cognizant of this logical fallacy, it is possible to somewhat mitigate our susceptibility to it. However, what happens when we lose our ability to determine which information flows we are exposed to? The increasing personalization of the internet poses a dilemma: while it conveniently aggregates material automatically that we are likely to be interested in, it potentially omits information that might provide us with a more complete or accurate representation of reality. This blind spot forms the nexus of the internet’s divisive influence and people are becoming more oblivious to its very existence.

The personalization of the internet has gained momentum over the past decade as a result of dramatic advances in machine learning. However, the primary factor underlying this trend toward tailored content is more economic than technical. Data mining has provided companies with a treasure trove of metrics that they have been able to exploit to customize user experiences in such a way that it benefits their bottom lines.<sup>30</sup> In his book *The Filter Bubble*, Eli Pariser traces efforts to personalize the web back to a watershed event that took place in December 2009. At that time, Google announced that it would rely on a set of 57 signals, including information such as a user’s geographic location and browsing history, to produce customized search results. While previously

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25 Ephrat Livni, “If Information Overload is Stressing You Out, Go on a Silence Diet,” *Quartz*, July 9, 2017, <https://qz.com/1023948/if-information-overload-is-stressing-you-out-go-on-a-silence-diet/>.

26 Marc Lewis, “Why We’re Hardwired to Hate Uncertainty,” *The Guardian*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/04/uncertainty-stressful-research-neuroscience>.

27 Jerome Kagan, “Motives and Development,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 22, no. 1 (April 1972): 51-66, <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1972-24142-001>.

28 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

29 Ibid.

30 Mark Hachman, “The Price of Free: How Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Google Sell You to Advertisers,” *PCWorld*, October 1, 2015, <https://www.pcworld.com/article/2986988/privacy/the-price-of-free-how-apple-facebook-microsoft-and-google-sell-you-to-advertisers.html>.

two users entering the same search term would be given identical results, from that point forward they could be presented with wildly varying information reflecting their own preferences and behavior.<sup>31</sup> Since then, companies across the internet have adopted similar algorithms that have been applied to a range of online activities. Consequently, individuals are now finding themselves inhabiting a world that seems to reflect their own values and beliefs with little understanding or appreciation of the knowledge that informs the differing views of others.<sup>32</sup>

The pervasive filtering of online content lends itself to the creation of virtual communities of likeminded individuals who, often lacking physical proximity to one another, might otherwise not come into contact. This, in turn, can produce powerful group dynamics that have an influential sway over the behavior of its members. Owing to the constant reinforcement of commonly held perceptions, individuals within the group are more likely to interpret new information in such a way that affirms the validity of their thinking, an effect known as confirmation bias. More than just having an influence on thought, however, intragroup communication can also instill a bias toward action. People have a natural propensity to take cues from others when trying to determine an appropriate course of action in ambiguous social situations. This principle, known as social proof, can be corrosive as it might compel otherwise moderate individuals to participate in radical activities in response to environmental prompts.<sup>33</sup> The anonymity afforded to individuals online likely further amplifies these effects because it contributes to a state of deindividuation that lowers personal inhibitions about engaging in mob behavior.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to underscore that individual responses to ambiguity are far from monolithic. While humans in general are prone to mitigate ambiguity, a person's tolerance for uncertainty exists on a spectrum.<sup>35</sup> A landmark study by the psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik suggests that individuals possessing greater rigidity in their thinking have a stronger intolerance of ambiguity.<sup>36</sup> Subsequent research by the social psychologist Arie Kruglanski builds upon the idea of ambiguity intolerance and suggests that one's "need for closure" is not static, but can fluctuate in response to situational factors, culture, and the broader social environment.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this need for closure is amplified during periods of high anxiety.<sup>38</sup> What is disturbing about such findings is that they suggest that amid rising uncertainty during a time of global upheaval, there are some individuals who will have a tendency to become more entrenched in their convictions. Rather than weighing evidence in a deliberate analysis of a given situation, they will rush to judgment, grasping at easy explanations to quickly allay their angst.

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31 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

32 Adam Waytz, "The Psychology Behind Fake News: Cognitive Biases Help Explain Our Polarized Media Climate," *Kellogg Insight*, March 6, 2017, <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/the-psychology-behind-fake-news>.

33 Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, 5th Edition (Boston: Pearson Education, 2009); S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen D. Reicher, "Contesting the 'Nature' Of Conformity: What Milgram and Zimbardo's Studies Really Show," *PLoS Biology* 10, no. 11 (November 2012): 1-4, <http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.1001426>.

34 Tim Adams, "How the Internet Created an Age of Rage," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/jul/24/internet-anonymity-trolling-tim-adams>.

35 Julie Beck, "How Uncertainty Fuels Anxiety," *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/03/how-uncertainty-fuels-anxiety/388066/>.

36 Else Frenkel-Brunswik, "Intolerance of Ambiguity as an Emotional and Perceptual Personality Variable," *Journal of Personality* 18, no. 1 (September 1949): 108-143, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1949.tb01236.x>.

37 Jamie Holmes, *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2015).

38 Maria Konnikova, "Why We Need Answers," *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/why-we-need-answers>.

This impulse is frequently borne out on social media, which is rife with scapegoating and conspiracy theories, especially in the hours after tragic and often complex events. Unfortunately, it is precisely this sort of novel and anger-inducing information that studies have shown tends to resonate the most with others online.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to these psychological mechanisms that lend social media its influence broadly speaking, it is worth noting that certain societal conditions may also help to explain the medium's hold within Southeast Asia more specifically. Informal communication channels are nothing new to a region that has long been beset with authoritarian regimes bent on shaping their respective national narratives. Prior to political reforms in several countries, state controls on the media and restrictions on speech caused individuals to become reliant on trusted friends and family for information that they would otherwise not have access to.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding the democratic strides that have been made in these places, media controls that have been imposed in recent years have ushered in a new era of press suppression marked by the arrest of journalists and the shuttering of news outlets.<sup>41</sup> The introduction of social media has, in effect, marked a return to a reliance on the sort of word-of-mouth communication that has traditionally played a central role in transmitting information, albeit with a 21st century twist. However, technological innovation often brings with it new vulnerabilities, and some in Southeast Asia see an opportunity ripe for exploitation.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA'S SOCIAL MEDIA MANIPULATIONS

Social media has certainly been used to positive effect in Southeast Asia. In 2007, the Myanmar military's harsh suppression of demonstrators during the country's "Saffron Revolution" drew international attention and condemnation as images of Buddhist monks being beaten by soldiers were shared online via social media platforms.<sup>42</sup> Several years later, these same online tools would once again play an important role in generating support behind opposition forces in the country when Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) used them to propagate the party's democratic message to the masses ahead of historic elections that brought the NLD to power. Elsewhere in the region, people in Thailand took to Twitter en masse in 2011 amid devastating floods to share information, call for help, and commiserate in the face of a haphazard government response.<sup>43</sup> In 2013, the upstart Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) pursued grassroots organizing online to amass giant crowds for rallies leading up to general elections that resulted in a surprisingly large loss of seats by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which had maintained an overwhelming grip on

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39 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 2018): 1146-1151, <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>; Rui Fan et al., "Anger is More Influential than Joy: Sentiment Correlation in Weibo," *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 10 (October 2014): 1-8, <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0110184>.

40 Bridget Di Certo, "Hip to be Squar," *Southeast Asia Globe*, December 9, 2013, <http://sea-globe.com/hip-squar-myanmar-southeast-asia-globe/>.

41 Alexandra Wake, "Amal Clooney No Match for Trump and China in Southeast Asia Press Clampdown," *The Interpreter*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/amal-clooney-no-match-trump-and-china-southeast-asia-press-clampdown>.

42 Mridul Chowdhury, "The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution," (Cambridge, MA: The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, September 2008), [http://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/Chowdhury\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Internet\\_in\\_Burmas\\_Saffron\\_Revolution.pdf\\_0.pdf](http://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/Chowdhury_Role_of_the_Internet_in_Burmas_Saffron_Revolution.pdf_0.pdf); Saadia Gardezi, "The Politics of Social Media in South East Asia," *IDG Connect*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.idgconnect.com/abstract/8467/the-politics-social-media-south-east-asia>.

43 Byron Perry, "Social Media Innovation Flourishes During Thailand Floods," *Tech in Asia*, November 21, 2011, <https://www.techinasia.com/thailand-flood-social-media-innovation>.

power for decades.<sup>44</sup> In late 2014, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was forced to issue an emergency decree that rescinded legislation that had eliminated direct elections for provincial governors, district chiefs, and mayors after an online outcry from outraged citizens. Even in Vietnam, which remains under one-party rule, the power of social media has been felt after online campaigns successfully forced the government's hand on multiple high-profile environmental issues.<sup>45</sup> These noteworthy success stories aside, however, social media's most significant contribution to the region probably has been to facilitate the mundane, everyday communication among families that, often divided by distance, would otherwise be out of touch.

While social media has served as a powerful tool to bring people together, it has also found use as a wedge to drive them apart. In a region marked by a diverse array of ethnic and religious groups living in close proximity, communal tensions have long been a fact of life. Among the many conflicts that dominate the politics of the region, perhaps none have been as caustic as that between the Buddhist and Muslim communities. In recent years, tensions have hit a boiling point in Myanmar at the same time that social media has been making inroads. The ongoing violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, which has resulted in an outflow of some 700,000 ethnic Rohingya Muslims to neighboring Bangladesh, epitomizes the magnifying effect that new technology is having on old conflicts.<sup>46</sup>

There is little doubt that Facebook has played a central role in stoking communal violence in Myanmar. The use of social media to spread rumors and Islamophobic rhetoric sparked limited bouts of violence in 2012 and 2014.<sup>47</sup> Facebook in particular has served as a platform to disseminate hate speech directed at the country's Muslim community writ large and lists have been distributed online of companies, organizations, and individuals accused of attacking Buddhism.<sup>48</sup> Most recently, the country's military has come under international censure for allegedly committing atrocities in Rakhine State in response to a small-scale attack on military outposts in August 2017 by a group calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), perpetuating violence that broke out the previous October. During a press conference in March 2018 to announce the interim findings of a U.N. fact-finding mission on the situation, the chairman, Marzuki Darusman, told reporters that social media had "substantively contributed to the level of acrimony" toward the Rohingya.<sup>49</sup> Although perhaps only coincidental, Facebook's Free Basics service in Myanmar was quietly terminated in September 2017 just as violence was ratcheting up in the country, a move that was officially part of a broader regulatory effort by the government to avert unfair competition practices in the telecommunications market.<sup>50</sup>

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44 Colin Meyn, "Virtual Democracy," *Southeast Asia Globe*, November 11, 2013, <http://sea-globe.com/virtual-democracy-social-media-elections-cambodia-cpp-cnpr/>.

45 Gwen Robinson et al., "Social Media Revolution is Tough to 'Like' for Southeast Asian Governments," *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 15, 2016, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Social-media-revolution-is-tough-to-like-for-Southeast-Asian-governments>.

46 Julhas Alam, "Rohingya in Camp Tell Myanmar Official They Survived Attacks," *Associated Press*, April 12, 2018, <https://apnews.com/47d6d9ede1974461a99ceb80d138e993>.

47 Gwen Robinson et al., "Social Media Revolution is Tough to 'Like'."

48 "Southeast Asian Governments Struggle to Cope with the Online Social Revolution," *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 15, 2016, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Southeast-Asian-governments-struggle-to-cope-with-the-online-social-revolution>.

49 Tom Miles, "U.N. Investigators Cite Facebook Role in Myanmar Crisis," *Reuters*, March 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1GQ2PN>.

50 Mariella Moon, "Facebook's Free Basics Quietly Pulled from Myanmar, Other Markets," *Engadget*, May 2, 2018,

While some of the vitriol online has come about organically, there has also been a coordinated campaign on the part of the ultranationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha to use platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to spread a false narrative about the Rohingya. The group's leader, Ashin Wirathu, who has been dubbed the "Buddhist Bin Laden," has risen to international prominence in large part because of his reliance on social media to spread his hateful rhetoric.<sup>51</sup> Given the virulent nature of such emotionally-charged content online, these postings have become increasingly ubiquitous as they are frequently shared and, in turn, receive more prominent placement in Facebook feeds.<sup>52</sup> In the wake of the ARSA attacks, the Facebook group for Ma Ba Tha supporters registered a significant spike in anti-Rohingya messages, illustrating the powerful tendency of such online associations to amplify and reinforce the thoughts of its individual members.<sup>53</sup> The hate speech and misinformation online has not just played a major role in tearing at the social fabric of Myanmar, it has also exerted a contagion effect abroad by galvanizing Muslim sympathizers to voice support for the Rohingya through their own use of falsehoods and misinformation. In one high-profile incident, Turkey's deputy prime minister, Mehmet Şimşek, posted photographs to Twitter purporting to show atrocities committed against the Rohingya, but which were subsequently found to be from unrelated events in other countries. Although he later posted a correction in which he noted the error, his original message had already been retweeted over 1,600 times.<sup>54</sup>

The communal tension between Buddhists and Muslims spurred on by social media has similarly played out in neighboring Thailand. The country has witnessed repeated violence over the years in its southernmost provinces, where a long-running separatist insurgency seeking to create an independent Muslim state has resulted in thousands of deaths.<sup>55</sup> Buddhist nationalists, feeling under duress, have taken to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pantip to spread anti-Muslim rhetoric and false narratives. Most notably, in October 2015, a popular monk named Phra Apichart Punnajanto posted a message to Facebook in which he said that a mosque should be burnt down for each Buddhist monk killed in the southern conflict. Although he has since been defrocked, the controversy bolstered his popularity and led to an outpouring of support on social media.<sup>56</sup> While social media has been fanning the flames of communal violence domestically in Thailand, it may also be influencing similar clashes outside the country's borders as there is evidence that Buddhist nationalists in Thailand, Myanmar, and nearby Sri Lanka have been interacting with one another over social media to amplify fabricated versions of events.<sup>57</sup>

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<https://www.engadget.com/2018/05/02/facebook-free-basics-quietly-pulled-myanmar/>.

51 Tej Parikh, "Social Media Exhibits Its Disruptive Power in Myanmar," *The Diplomat*, November 9, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/social-media-exhibits-its-disruptive-power-in-myanmar/>.

52 Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, "A War of Words Puts Facebook at the Center of Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-rohingya.html>.

53 Michael Safi, "Revealed: Facebook Hate Speech Exploded in Myanmar During Rohingya Crisis," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/03/revealed-facebook-hate-speech-exploded-in-myanmar-during-rohingya-crisis>.

54 "Turkish Deputy PM Denounced for Misleading Twitter Pictures on Rakhine Conflict," *The Irrawaddy*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/turkish-deputy-pm-denounced-misleading-twitter-pictures-rakhine-conflict.html>.

55 Maximilian Morch, "The Slow Burning Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South," *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/the-slow-burning-insurgency-in-thailands-deep-south/>.

56 Abby Seiff and Rin Jirenuwat, "A Thai Monk Is Using Social Media to Preach Violence Against Muslims," *Newsweek*, April 4, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/2016/04/15/thailand-monk-apichart-social-media-muslim-violence-443698.html>.

57 Devon Haynie, "The Regional Reach of Buddhist Nationalism," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 7, 2017,

Social media has not just been limited to stoking sectarian conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in the region, it has amplified other interreligious tensions as well. When Indonesian President Joko Widodo was running for office in 2014, he was the target of a smear campaign on social media that alleged he was of Chinese descent and a Christian, accusations that he sought to refute by posting his marriage certificate to Facebook and making a pilgrimage to Mecca just before the election.<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, in late 2016, a video surfaced online in the run-up to Jakarta's gubernatorial election in which the Chinese Christian incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, commonly referred to as "Ahok," appeared to be criticizing the Quran, sparking public outrage. He not only lost his re-election bid to a conservative Muslim candidate following a massive protest, but was also later sentenced to two years in jail for committing blasphemy.<sup>59</sup> Although it was subsequently exposed that the individual responsible for uploading the video had edited the speech, during which Ahok was actually chastising his political opponents for citing a verse in the Quran to dissuade people from voting for him, rather than criticizing the holy book itself, the former governor remains imprisoned.<sup>60</sup>

As these examples illustrate, the use of social media to transmit willful disinformation, and often unintentional misinformation, has stirred longstanding schisms in intercommunal relations at the grassroots level throughout Southeast Asia. In many cases, individuals have harnessed the power of social media to amplify their xenophobic messages by seeding false information into an already complex and confusing information environment as a way of gaining support for their cause among those people least tolerant of living amid such ambiguity. As hate speech spreads and gains wider acceptance, it accelerates the erosion of already weak civil societies, marked by incessant intercommunal strife and underdeveloped institutions. Over time, this fragmentation of society may pose an existential threat to the integrity of the region's most fragile democracies.

Yet, in addition to this threat to democratization from below, social media increasingly poses a threat from above as well. Contrary to the expectations of many cyber-utopians that online communication platforms would lend a voice to the masses and, therefore, disrupt the ability of powerful figures to consolidate political control, some of the region's leaders have actually found ways to appropriate such tools to their advantage. In his book *The Dictator's Learning Curve*, William Dobson argues that modern authoritarians have adapted to preserve their power amid growing pressures brought about, in large part, by technological change. Rather than relying on traditional forms of intimidation to maintain control, modern-day dictators are turning to more subtle coercion tactics. Key to this effort is the goal of keeping the public apathetic and uninvolved in political life.<sup>61</sup> China offers a prime example of how the incessant information flows online can be harnessed in the pursuit of this end.

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<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-11-07/buddhist-nationalism-reaches-beyond-myanmar>.

58 Paul Mozur and Mark Scott, "Fake News in U.S. Election? Elsewhere, That's Nothing New," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/technology/fake-news-on-facebook-in-foreign-elections-thats-not-new.html?mcubz=0&r=0>.

59 Natashya Gutierrez, "How Facebook Has Affected ASEAN Democracies," *Rappler*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/187963-asean-democracy-impact-facebook>.

60 Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "Man Who Uploaded Controversial Video of Ex-Jakarta Governor Ahok Sentenced to Jail," *The Straits Times*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/man-who-uploaded-controversial-ahok-video-sentenced-to-jail>.

61 William J. Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

China has gained a significant amount of notoriety in the international press over the past couple of decades for its implementation of strict controls on online speech. Through the use of a sophisticated system of technological and human surveillance, the Chinese Communist Party has employed brute force tactics as a means of silencing dissent and prohibiting access to information that could present government leaders in an unfavorable light. Even with these repressive measures in place, however, anti-regime messages continue to proliferate on the Chinese internet, owing to the ability of the country's netizens to circumvent censorship mechanisms.<sup>62</sup> The Chinese government has, consequently, found itself caught up in a digital cat-and-mouse game with internet users that has required it to expend a significant amount of time and resources to maintain its tight control on speech.

In recent years, the Chinese regime has adopted a new approach to how it counters online dissent. To be sure, the elaborate system of censorship remains in place. However, China's leaders have found a possibly more effective solution to controlling public opinion, even while allowing their critics to speak their minds. A study released in 2017 by researchers from several prominent U.S. universities explored the activities of China's "50 Cent Party," a colloquialism ascribed to individuals allegedly paid a nominal sum by the government to post pro-regime comments on social media. According to the findings of the research, while there is no evidence to substantiate claims that ordinary citizens are employed in this manner, the government itself fabricates some 448 million comments online each year. Rather than seeking to counter the arguments of critics on controversial issues, government workers simply flood sites with posts that are intended to distract the public and change the subject, often using an appeal to Chinese nationalism.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, while the mobilization of the 50 Cent Party is largely intended to quell internal dissent and mitigate the potential for regime-threatening collective action, there are indications that these forces are being mustered for intervention outside the mainland as well. In the run-up to Taiwan's 2016 presidential election, the Chinese government temporarily removed its block on Facebook access, allowing commentators to post a flurry of messages attacking the Democratic Progressive Party candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, whom the Chinese government views as harboring a pro-independence agenda.<sup>64</sup> It is important to note that this effort to deter the Taiwan public from casting ballots for Tsai was ultimately unsuccessful and may have even aided her victory due to the transparent manner in which the attacks were carried out. China's overt interference in the election very likely triggered counterproductive "psychological reactance" among Taiwan's electorate, who were angered by this perceived attempt to control their behavior.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the Chinese government's use of such organized online persuasion tactics suggests that regime leaders are learning how to manipulate powerful psychological phenomena such as social proof to their advantage as they seek

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62 Mark McDonald, "Watch Your Language! (In China, They Really Do)," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2012, <https://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/13/watch-your-language-and-in-china-they-do/>.

63 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (August 2017): 484-501, [https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/how\\_the\\_chinese\\_government\\_fabricates\\_social\\_media\\_posts\\_for\\_strategic\\_distraction\\_not\\_engaged\\_argument.pdf](https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/how_the_chinese_government_fabricates_social_media_posts_for_strategic_distraction_not_engaged_argument.pdf).

64 Oiwan Lam, "When China Briefly Unblocked Facebook, Trolls Rushed In," *Advox*, November 17, 2015, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2015/11/17/when-china-briefly-unblocked-facebook-trolls-rushed-in/>.

65 Ryan Smerek, "Don't Tread on Me! Psychological Reactance as Omnipresent," *Psychology Today*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/learning-work/201712/don-t-tread-me-psychological-reactance-omnipresent>.

to sow support for the regime while drowning out the voices of their critics.

A couple of prominent, democratically-elected strongman leaders in Southeast Asia have similarly begun to use social media as a means of bolstering their support and squelching dissent. Cambodia serves as a particularly conspicuous case study as Prime Minister Hun Sen has become increasingly reliant on Facebook as a means to propagandize his ruling Cambodian People's Party. Hun Sen's embrace of the platform most likely was seen as a political imperative following the stunning performance of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party in the 2013 general election.<sup>66</sup> The youthful demographics in Cambodia, where two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, has made it necessary to find ways to appeal to younger voters.<sup>67</sup> It is an especially tall order for a 65-year-old who has ruled with an iron fist for more than three decades to cultivate a softer image to make inroads with today's youth. Nevertheless, Hun Sen has sought to diminish his authoritarian image online by frequently posting selfies and messages about his family.<sup>68</sup> Rather than shutting down access to Facebook as some in civil society once feared, Hun Sen has actually invited Cambodians to express their concerns on his Facebook page.<sup>69</sup> However, Hun Sen's use of social media to build his support has been much more duplicitous.

Today, Hun Sen's Facebook page indicates that he has more than 10 million "likes" and followers.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, a report by the public relations firm Burston-Marsteller indicates that he was the eighth most followed world leader on Facebook in 2017 and recorded the second most interactions of any sitting leader the year prior.<sup>71</sup> But all is not as it seems. In March 2016, the then-head of the CNRP, Sam Rainsy, in a Facebook post, accused Hun Sen of buying "likes," an allegation that ultimately resulted in his conviction on a charge of defamation.<sup>72</sup> Rainsy had cited a story in the *Phnom Penh Post* at the time, which stated that more than half of the "likes" recorded on Hun Sen's page in the preceding month had actually originated from abroad, suggesting that offshore "click farms" had been employed to make him appear more popular with the grassroots, in what has become an increasingly common ploy online referred to as "astroturfing."<sup>73</sup> More disturbing than this manipulation of Facebook to fake support, however, has been Hun Sen's use of the platform to fake news. Hun Sen and other ruling CPP officials maintain a close relationship with Lim Cheavutha, the founder and CEO of the online media outlet *Fresh News*. The company, which largely relies on Facebook to disseminate its stories, has posted a number of dubious pieces to the web that have vilified opposition figures and dissidents without providing any named

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66 Will Brehm, "Cambodia's Social Media Warnings for Trump's America," *East Asia Forum*, January 19, 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/01/19/cambodias-social-media-warnings-for-trumps-america/>.

67 Julia Wallace, "As Demographics in Cambodia Shift, Youth Seek Political Change," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/world/asia/cambodia-hun-sen-sam-rainsy.html>.

68 Mong Palatino, "Behind Cambodia's Social Media War," *The Diplomat*, March 17, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/behind-cambodias-social-media-war/>.

69 Gwen Robinson et al., "Social Media Revolution is Tough to 'Like'"; Colin Meyn, "Virtual Democracy."

70 "Samdech Hun Sen, Cambodian Prime Minister," Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/hunsencambodia/>.

71 "World Leaders on Facebook 2017," *Burson-Marsteller*, <https://www.burson-marsteller.com/what-we-do/our-thinking/world-leaders-on-facebook-2017/world-leaders-on-facebook-2017-full-study/>.

72 Niem Chheng, "Judge Rejects Rainsy's Claim that Hun Sen Bought Facebook 'Likes,'" *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/judge-rejects-rainsys-claim-hun-sen-bought-facebook-likes>.

73 Daniel Nass and Shaun Turton, "Only 20 Percent of PM's Recent Facebook 'Likes' from Cambodia," *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/only-20-cent-pms-recent-facebook-likes-cambodia>.

sources or evidence to back up its claims.<sup>74</sup> These fabricated stories have resulted in real-world consequences, paving the way for the regime's critics to be targeted for raids and arrests.<sup>75</sup>

Hun Sen is not the only Southeast Asian leader who has come to rely on the manipulation of social media to shore up his support. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has also proven himself especially adept at using Facebook to enhance his power. Facebook served as one of the major battlegrounds in the country's 2016 presidential election, with each of the five candidates using the platform to campaign. Just as is the case in Cambodia, social media has become so pervasive in the country that it has become a political necessity to use such technological tools for voter outreach.<sup>76</sup> In the case of the Philippines, the millions of citizens employed overseas largely depend on Facebook to maintain ties with their families.<sup>77</sup> In fact, the country's love affair with social media was underscored in 2014 when *TIME* magazine deemed the Makati City district of Manila the "Selfie Capital of the World."<sup>78</sup> It is, therefore, no surprise that Duterte has sought to manipulate Facebook to his political advantage.

The Philippine-based online news website *Rappler* has been locked in an ongoing battle with the government since publishing a series of stories exposing Duterte's use of paid trolls, bots, and intimidation tactics as part of his social media campaign.<sup>79</sup> Even after taking office, Duterte has continued to use online propaganda and disinformation, particularly with regard to his administration's controversial war on drugs, to shore up his support.<sup>80</sup> A group of social media influencers, who refer to themselves collectively as Diehard Duterte Supporters, have been granted special access to officials and, in some cases, have been employed by the government to post content online favorable to the administration.<sup>81</sup> As has become the norm throughout Southeast Asia, social media in the Philippines is now teeming with fake news. In an August 2016 post to Facebook, Duterte's campaign spokesman shared a picture of a young girl whom he alleged had been raped and killed by a drug dealer. However, a journalist subsequently debunked the image, revealing that it had originated from Brazil rather than the Philippines.<sup>82</sup> Another story that went viral around the same time stated that the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration had recognized Duterte as "the best

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74 Megha Rajagopalan, "This Country's Democracy Has Fallen Apart — And it Played Out to Millions on Facebook," *BuzzFeed*, January 21, 2018, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/facebook-cambodia-democracy?utm\\_term=.dfVddQ1N4x#.trDGGYv9lo](https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/facebook-cambodia-democracy?utm_term=.dfVddQ1N4x#.trDGGYv9lo).

75 Cory Doctorow, "Facebook Helped Consolidate Power for Cambodia's Dictator and His Attack-Dog Media, Then Killed the Independent Press's Platform," *Boing Boing*, January 22, 2018, <https://boingboing.net/2018/01/22/khmer-stooge.html>.

76 Aim Sinpeng, "How Duterte Won the Election on Facebook," *New Mandala*, May 12, 2016, <http://www.newmandala.org/how-duterte-won-the-election-on-facebook/>.

77 Adrian Chen, "When a Populist Demagogue Takes Power," *The New Yorker*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/when-a-populist-demagogue-takes-power>.

78 Chris Wilson, "The Selfiest Cities in the World: TIME's Definitive Ranking," *TIME*, March 10, 2014, <http://time.com/selfies-cities-world-rankings/>.

79 Maria A. Ressa, "Propaganda War: Weaponizing the Internet," *Rappler*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet>.

80 Lauren Etter, "What Happens When the Government Uses Facebook as a Weapon?" *Bloomberg*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-07/how-rodrido-duterte-turned-facebook-into-a-weapon-with-a-little-help-from-facebook>.

81 Natashya Gutierrez, "State-Sponsored Hate: The Rise of the Pro-Duterte Bloggers," *Rappler*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/178709-duterte-die-hard-supporters-bloggers-propaganda-pcoo>.

82 Camille Elemia, "Photo Used by Duterte Camp to Hit Critics Taken in Brazil, Not PH," *Rappler*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/144551-duterte-camp-brazil-photo-rape-victim-critics>.

president in the solar system.” While many online laughed it off as obvious satire, some Duterte supporters appeared to take the news quite seriously.<sup>83</sup>

*Rappler's* investigative journalism into various alleged misdeeds by the Duterte government culminated with a decision by the country's Security and Exchange Commission in January 2018 to revoke the company's operating license on a charge that it had violated a constitutional provision on media ownership because of funding originating from overseas. The company has refuted the allegations against it and continues to operate pending the outcome of a legal fight.<sup>84</sup> The fate that has befallen *Rappler* is similar to the harassment experienced by other news outlets throughout the region. In Cambodia, the Hun Sen government has shut down a number of radio stations across the country that had broadcasted programming from outlets such as *Voice of Democracy*, *Radio Free Asia*, and *Voice of America*.<sup>85</sup> It has also forced the closure of the English-language *Cambodia Daily* after 24 years in operation.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, Chinese media organizations have been making inroads following the completion of a memorandum of understanding on information cooperation signed in 2017.<sup>87</sup> The silencing of independent journalism only adds fuel to the raging fire of disinformation engulfing the internet in Southeast Asia. In the absence of trustworthy and reliable sources of information, the public is left to fend for itself as forces take hold that threaten a dissolution of hard-won democratic freedoms. The question remains as to how much worse the situation is likely to get and what measures can be taken to change course before it's too late.

## UNITING IN THE DIGITAL FUTURE

The volume of information surrounding us continues to multiply at an exponential rate brought about by advances in technology and economies of scale. According to a forecast by the technology firm Cisco, it would take more than 5 million years just to watch the amount of video that will circulate on the internet globally each month in 2021.<sup>88</sup> As difficult as it is today to sort fact from fiction online, technology currently in development portends a future in which even our own eyes and ears may serve to deceive us. In 2015, a team of researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham experimenting with off-the-shelf voice impersonation software demonstrated an ability to take between three to five minutes of a target individual's recorded voice to create a synthesized version capable of deceiving both humans and sophisticated biometric security systems. The following year, an international research team garnered widespread media attention for a tool it developed that would allow users

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83 “Busted: NASA Hailed Duterte as ‘the Best President in the Solar System?’ Fake, but Some Supporters Believed It!,” *Meme Buster*, August 25, 2016, <https://memebuster.net/nasa-hailed-duterte-best-president-in-the-solar-system/>.

84 Carmela Fonbuena, “SEC Revokes Rappler’s Registration,” *Rappler*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/193687-rappler-registration-revoked>.

85 Holly Robertson, “Suddenly it’s Open Season on the Press in Cambodia,” *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/08/30/suddenly-its-open-season-on-the-press-in-cambodia/?utm\\_term=.883bee4c569b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/08/30/suddenly-its-open-season-on-the-press-in-cambodia/?utm_term=.883bee4c569b).

86 Thomas Beller, “The Devastating Shutdown of the Cambodia Daily,” *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-devastating-shutdown-of-the-cambodia-daily>.

87 Nathan Vanderklippe, “In Cambodia, Independent Media Close as Chinese Content Moves In,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/in-cambodia-independent-media-have-closed-as-chinese-content-moves-in/article37464168/>.

88 “The Zettabyte Era: Trends and Analysis,” Cisco, June 7, 2017, <https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collateral/service-provider/visual-networking-index-vni/vni-hyperconnectivity-wp.html>.

to manipulate video in real time. Using software called Face2Face and a webcam, the researchers showed how they can capture an individual's facial movements and digitally alter videos to make famous politicians such as George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump mimic the expressions.<sup>89</sup> These are just a couple of examples of the dramatic advances being made in voice synthetization and video manipulation technologies. While these tools remain in their infancy, they will likely be put into widespread use soon. Obviously, the potential of such technology at the grassroots level to incite conflict and at the national level to mislead the public is a disturbing proposition. It is, therefore, becoming increasingly imperative to find ways to mitigate this looming threat.

Governments across Southeast Asia are already grappling with legal measures to help curb the spread of the online hate speech that is inflaming internecine conflicts. However, the immaturity and politicization of the legal institutions in many of these countries are proving problematic because the enforcement of these laws is only serving to further curtail democratic freedoms. In some cases, laws against defamation are being interpreted too broadly, making them a useful tool to silence dissent. In Myanmar, for instance, a controversial provision of the country's 2013 Telecommunications Law has led to a number of arrests of individuals who have been accused of libel for their social media posts that are critical of government leaders, a situation that ironically has only worsened under NLD leadership.<sup>90</sup> The government took further measures to assert control over social media in March 2018 when the legislature approved funding for a Social Media Monitoring Team, ostensibly to ward off domestic instability.<sup>91</sup> In Thailand, the ambiguity surrounding the Computer Crimes Act of 2007 and the country's long-standing *lèse-majesté* law, which prohibits insult to the monarchy, have combined to create a particularly repressive speech environment online. Among a number of harsh penalties meted out recently, a Thai man was sentenced to 35 years in prison for Facebook posts that authorities deemed critical of the royal family in 2017 and eight individuals were arrested and charged with sedition the previous year for running a Facebook page satirizing the country's prime minister.<sup>92</sup> In Indonesia, the Electronic Information and Transactions Law has served to stymie some of the hate speech online, but only insofar as it has quelled government critics.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Malaysia's legislature in April 2018 approved a bill that would impose punishments of up to six years in prison for the creation and dissemination of "fake news," in a move that critics viewed as an attempt to stifle free speech ahead of the country's general election the following month.<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile, a draft cybercrime law in Cambodia has

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89 Alina Polyakova and Spencer Phipps Boyer, "The future of political warfare: Russia, the West, and the coming age of digital competition," (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-future-of-political-warfare-russia-the-west-and-the-coming-age-of-global-digital-competition/>; Olivia Solon, "The Future of Fake News: Don't Believe Everything You Read, See or Hear," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/26/fake-news-obama-video-trump-face2face-doctored-content>.

90 Francis Wade, "In Burma, the Party that Once Defended Dissidents is Letting Them be Thrown in Jail," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/08/11/in-burma-the-party-that-once-defended-dissidents-is-throwing-them-into-jail/?utm\\_term=.abee2bf36a39](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/08/11/in-burma-the-party-that-once-defended-dissidents-is-throwing-them-into-jail/?utm_term=.abee2bf36a39).

91 Zaw Zaw Htwe and Aung Kyaw Nyunt, "Critics Rail Against Govt Budget for Monitoring of Facebook," *The Myanmar Times*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/critics-rail-against-govt-budget-monitoring-facebook.html>.

92 Aim Sinpeng, "Southeast Asian Cyberspace: Politics, Censorship, Polarisation," *New Mandala*, November 1, 2017, <http://www.newmandala.org/southeast-asian-cyberspace-politics-censorship-polarisation/>.

93 "EDITORIAL: Countering Hate Speech," *The Jakarta Post*, November 28, 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/11/28/editorial-countering-hate-speech.html>.

94 Hannah Beech, "As Malaysia Moves to Ban 'Fake News,' Worries About Who Decides the Truth," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/02/world/asia/malaysia-fake-news-law.html>.

come under fire for being a thinly-veiled effort to criminalize dissent under the guise of a broader effort to avert domestic unrest.<sup>95</sup>

There is a growing chorus of voices around the globe advocating for social media firms to assume a more proactive role in controlling the content shared on their platforms. Supporters of this corporate responsibility approach to curbing online disinformation argue in favor of both human and technological interventions to prevent falsehoods from running rampant.<sup>96</sup> While it may certainly be the case that the operators of social media platforms could be doing more to monitor and censor the information traversing their systems, there is also a legitimate question as to the effectiveness of such measures. In fact, corporate meddling may in some cases be accompanied by unintended consequences that prove more harmful than helpful. Take for instance an experiment that Facebook began in 2017 on its news feed in six countries, which included Cambodia. In these locations, the company separated content produced by news sites from that originating from friends and family. While the latter continued to populate the news feed that greeted users when they logged in, the posts from news organizations and other publishers were relegated to a new section called “Explore.” The change resulted in an amplification of false stories because of the greater difficulty in accessing more objective sources of information.<sup>97</sup> Although the company announced it was ending the test in March 2018, a worldwide alteration to the news feed algorithm intended to increase “meaningful interaction” on Facebook was rolled out earlier in the year with a similar effect.<sup>98</sup>

Actions taken by Facebook specifically to prevent misuse of its platform have repeatedly posed dilemmas for the company. For example, the policy that users should have profile names that match their true names is intended, at least in part, to authenticate the identity of its users in an effort to prevent nefarious activity on the site. This stipulation has not only done little to prevent the creation of fake accounts, but it has jeopardized the safety of dissidents in countries such as Thailand, where the junta-led government has been able to track the activities of its critics.<sup>99</sup> Another predicament has arisen from Facebook’s deference to local laws in the places in which it operates. Given the highly politicized nature of the judicial system in several Southeast Asian countries, the company has time and again found itself caught up in controversy for allegedly taking sides in conflicts while doing the bidding of despots.<sup>100</sup> Even Facebook’s use of human monitors to flag objectionable content has proven problematic. The volume of material uploaded to the site is so great and the number of native-speaking monitors

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95 Erin Handley, “Freedom of Expression Online in Cambodia ‘Stifled by Laws,’” *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/freedom-expression-online-cambodia-stifled-laws>.

96 Farhad Manjoo and Kevin Roose, “How to Fix Facebook? We Asked 9 Experts,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/technology/how-to-fix-facebook-we-asked-9-experts.html>.

97 Sheera Frenkel, Nicholas Casey, and Paul Mozur, “In Some Countries, Facebook’s Fiddling Has Magnified Fake News,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/14/technology/facebook-news-feed-changes.html>.

98 Sheera Frenkel, “Facebook to End News Feed Experiment in 6 Countries That Magnified Fake News,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/technology/facebook-end-news-feed-experiment-six-countries-that-magnified-fake-news.html>.

99 Scott Shane and Mike Isaac, “Facebook Says It’s Policing Fake Accounts. But They’re Still Easy to Spot,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/03/technology/facebook-fake-accounts.html>; Christina Larson, “Facebook Can’t Cope with the World It’s Created,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/07/facebook-cant-cope-with-the-world-its-created/>.

100 David Hutt, “Is Facebook Putting Profit Before Freedom in Southeast Asia?” *Asia Times*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/facebook-putting-profit-freedom-seasia/>.

in many countries so few that such an effort has become a Sisyphean task. In an open letter to Mark Zuckerberg in April 2018, several civil society organizations in Myanmar highlighted Facebook's lack of Burmese-speaking staff members who can interface with local monitors, and noted that delays in removing content deemed to violate the company's community standards allowed plenty of time for hate speech and rumors to circulate widely.<sup>101</sup> The same situation is playing out across the region in countries where Facebook has no offices and no effective way of communicating with the local population.<sup>102</sup> Although the company has had success employing artificial intelligence to filter some objectionable material, the technology has proven less capable of censoring hate speech because of the intricacies of context and culture.<sup>103</sup>

Amid the ongoing debate worldwide about how best to mitigate social media's polarizing influence, some have argued that a problem born of technology merits a technological solution. Advocates of a technology-mediated intervention suggest that the same algorithms contributing to the increased personalization of the web could be reversed to feed content to individuals that directly contradicts their expressed beliefs.<sup>104</sup> While it is plausible that such contrived exposure to opposing viewpoints would help penetrate the information bubbles that have given rise to an era of digital tribalism, recent research suggests it might also prove counterproductive. A study published in 2018 of Twitter users in the United States found that exposing political partisans to contradictory opinions through the use of an automated Twitter bot actually led to a reinforcement of existing views. The authors theorize this outcome may reflect a tendency toward "motivated reasoning," a psychological process wherein individuals confronted with contradictory information seek to allay their mental discomfort by distorting new information to confirm what they already believe.<sup>105</sup> Once again, this study underscores how psychological drivers give rise to social media's manipulative power.

The basic mechanisms of human psychology might seem to portend that even our best efforts to curb technology's pernicious byproducts will be a largely futile endeavor. On the contrary, perhaps the most effective means of neutralizing the corrosive tendencies of social media lies in acknowledging a simple reality: Although there is little we can do to exert control over our information flows or our physiological capacity to process them, there may be ways to render those individuals least inclined to tolerate an ambiguous world more comfortable living in the gray.

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101 Megha Rajagopalan, "NGOs Complain They're Doing Facebook's Work for Them," *BuzzFeed*, April 6, 2018, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/zuckerberg-open-letter-hate-speech-myanmar?utm\\_term=.sgoYYN7K0J#\\_yn3xxYK8rP](https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/zuckerberg-open-letter-hate-speech-myanmar?utm_term=.sgoYYN7K0J#_yn3xxYK8rP).

102 Megha Rajagopalan and Aisha Nazim, "'We Had to Stop Facebook': When Anti-Muslim Violence Goes Viral," *BuzzFeed*, April 7, 2018, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/we-had-to-stop-facebook-when-anti-muslim-violence-goes-viral?utm\\_term=.qj344MNg8#.btjkkyr4I](https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/we-had-to-stop-facebook-when-anti-muslim-violence-goes-viral?utm_term=.qj344MNg8#.btjkkyr4I).

103 Sheera Frenkel, "Facebook's Latest Transparency Move: Data, Few Details, on What It Removes," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/technology/facebook-removal-posts-fake-accounts.html>.

104 Geoffrey A. Fowler, "What if Facebook Gave Us an Opposing-Viewpoints Button?" *The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-if-facebook-gave-us-an-opposing-viewpoints-button-1463573101>; Sami Main, "BuzzFeed Is Exposing Readers to Opposing Viewpoints with 'Outside Your Bubble' Initiative," *Ad Week*, February 17, 2017, <http://www.adweek.com/digital/buzzfeed-is-exposing-readers-to-opposing-viewpoints-with-outside-your-bubble-initiative/>.

105 Christopher Bail et al., "Exposure to Opposing Views can Increase Political Polarization: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment on Social Media," *SocArXiv*, (March 2018), <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/4ygux/>.

Education will need to be the cornerstone of any successful effort to inoculate the public against the viral scourge of online disinformation. Initiatives should be pursued to promote digital literacy at all age levels to help individuals better learn how to cope with today's information-rich environment. An experimental high school curriculum introduced in Italy in 2017 that is designed to help students recognize fake news may offer one model of how such 21st century lessons can be incorporated into traditional educational methods.<sup>106</sup> Within Southeast Asia, non-profit and governmental organizations are already beginning to take on the task of educating the public about social media responsibility in countries where online hate speech has stoked communal tensions. In Myanmar, an innovative grassroots campaign called Panzagar, or "Flower Speech" in English, has taken to Facebook to promote conscientious free speech as a way of staunching the propagation of harmful narratives.<sup>107</sup> Panzagar's advocacy is not just limited to its online presence, however, as the organization also arranges public workshops and distributes material in schools and on the streets to get its message of tolerance out.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the regulatory Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission has launched a "Click Wisely" campaign designed to promote responsible internet use that has included the creation of a website used to debunk viral fake news stories.<sup>109</sup> To Facebook's credit, the company has also taken the initiative to run digital literacy programs in countries across Southeast Asia and has been working with local nongovernmental organizations to publicize its community standards.<sup>110</sup>

This educational approach must go beyond just seeking to reduce the current spread of toxic vitriol online through the encouragement of civil dialogue and an emphasis on fact-checking. A longer-term solution necessitates addressing the underlying factors that have made segments of the public susceptible to social media's siren song of disinformation, namely the discomfort of some people with living in an ambiguous world. Toward this end, individuals should be made aware of the cognitive biases that hold sway over them so that they can learn to be more deliberative in their thinking and mitigate their susceptibility to deception online. At the same time, there is also much that can be done to encourage people to simply break out of their comfort zones and come to embrace the unknown. Educational curricula that emphasize multidisciplinary learning would likely instill a number of important skills including enhanced creativity and a greater appreciation for complexity. The study of second languages languages, for instance, has been shown to help bolster people's tolerance of ambiguity while also making them more empathetic to other cultures.<sup>111</sup> A broad exposure to a multitude of subjects also lends itself to the serendipitous discovery of knowledge that can help

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106 Jason Horowitz, "In Italian Schools, Reading, Writing and Recognizing Fake News," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/world/europe/italy-fake-news.html>.

107 Mari Michener Oye, "Using 'Flower Speech' and New Facebook Tools, Myanmar Fights Online Hate Speech," *Religion News Service*, December 24, 2014, <https://religionnews.com/2014/12/24/using-flower-fights-online-hate-speech/>.

108 Hereward Holland, "Facebook in Myanmar: Amplifying Hate Speech?" *Al Jazeera*, June 14, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/06/facebook-myanmar-rohingya-amplifying-hate-speech-2014612112834290144.html>.

109 Paige Occeñola, "Fake News and Freedom of Expression in Southeast Asia," *Rappler*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/188573-fake-news-freedom-expression-southeast-asia>.

110 John Reed and Hannah Kuchler, "Why South-East Asia's Politics Are Proving a Problem for Facebook," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/9b84a5a4-33ff-11e8-a3ae-fd3fd4564aa6>; Mathew Ingram, "In Some Countries, Fake News on Facebook is a Matter of Life and Death," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/facebook-rohingya-myanmar-fake-news.php>.

111 Amy Thompson, "How Learning a New Language Improves Tolerance," *The Huffington Post*, December 12, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-conversation-us/how-learning-a-new-langua\\_b\\_13579718.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-conversation-us/how-learning-a-new-langua_b_13579718.html).

to penetrate the information bubbles that have become an intrinsic part of our digital lives, without arousing psychological defense mechanisms that can make individuals resistant to accepting new and sometimes contradictory information.

These efforts to encourage open-minded thinking in the educational realm should also be extended to the physical world. A growing body of research points to the role that the design of our physical communities exerts on our happiness and social well-being.<sup>112</sup> The physical layout of our environments can be better planned so as to rekindle the spontaneous real-world interactions among a diversity of people that have succumbed to the homogenous virtual communities online. Singapore offers an interesting case study of how such intentional urban planning has been implemented to engender greater societal harmony in a multi-ethnic environment.<sup>113</sup> While the city-state has wrestled with the occasional outbreak of interethnic violence, most notably in the race riots of 1964 and 1969, it has largely managed to stave off hostilities, in part, by deliberately seeking to avoid the creation of racial enclaves.<sup>114</sup> Elsewhere in the region, there are encouraging signs that urban planners are taking this need to foster diverse interactions into account. In Myanmar, the Yangon Heritage Trust, under the leadership of the historian Thant Myint-U, has been working to preserve the city's unique colonial architecture while maintaining the diverse character of the community. The civil society organization has put together a comprehensive development strategy that calls for the creation of a livable city that improves social cohesion and cultivates a shared sense of civic pride.<sup>115</sup>

The United States also has an opportunity to effect positive change in Southeast Asia's information sphere. Through government initiatives and partnerships with civil society organizations, Washington can help to promote digital literacy and social media responsibility in countries throughout the region. As an example of one such synergy, the nonprofit group Counterpart International has cooperated with the U.S. Agency for International Development to create a guide intended to help foreign nongovernmental organizations effectively leverage social media in their advocacy work.<sup>116</sup> Going beyond such targeted efforts, however, Washington can also lend its unique experience in institution-building to help stimulate democratic resilience in countries where civil society is most vulnerable to the corrosive influence of internet-based disinformation campaigns. For instance, professional education exchange programs in fields such as journalism and the law could help to build an important bulwark against the spread of false information while also enhancing media oversight mechanisms in a manner that does not impinge upon free speech rights. For countries that still lack a well-developed press corps that serves as a trustworthy reference point, the United States could also support training programs to encourage responsible citizen journalism as a means to counter destructive narratives online.

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112 Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

113 Colin Marshall, "Story of Cities #27: Singapore – The Most Meticulously Planned City in the World," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/21/story-cities-singapore-carefully-planned-lee-kuan-yew>.

114 Walter Sim, "The Race Issue: How Far Has Singapore Come?" *The Straits Times*, November 8, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/the-race-issue-how-far-has-singapore-come>.

115 "Yangon Heritage Strategy," Yangon Heritage Trust, <http://www.yhtliveableyangon.org/en/home/>.

116 "Social Networking: A Guide to Strengthening Civil Society through Social Media," USAID, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/SMGuide4CSO.pdf>.

Above all else, perhaps one of the most effective measures Washington could take to undercut social media's divisive tendencies in the region would be to help foster stronger civil societies and physical communities capable of opposing these factious forces online. The United States could use its experience administering programs such as AmeriCorps to assist countries throughout the region in establishing similar public-private partnerships as a means to rebuild interpersonal relations within physical communities and promote intercommunal engagement in expectation that it will help to identify common values and shared beliefs. AmeriCorps, which functions as a sort of domestic Peace Corps, places volunteers in a variety of positions in fields such as health, education, and public safety, with the intention of improving the welfare of the country and promoting civic engagement. Similar programs in Southeast Asia's developing democracies would likely not only serve to help erode intercommunal barriers by bringing individuals of different backgrounds together for a common cause, but would likely also have the added benefit of enhancing the self-reliance of those countries to make them less dependent on foreign aid during times of crisis.

While this study has sought to provide a holistic, albeit brief, analysis of the various contributing factors that have made social media a threat to the consolidation of democratic governments in Southeast Asia, additional research is warranted to further understand the specific nature of its influence on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, the psychological underpinnings of social media's persuasive power and the suggested remediation strategies to mitigate its caustic effects that are identified here have broad applicability. The dynamics playing out online in the region are replicated in other areas throughout the world. In fact, the effective weaponization of social media that has already taken place points to a future of international conflict in which countries and non-state actors alike will be disposed to rely more heavily on the information domain to attack their adversaries. Consequently, it is becoming imperative that the U.S. intelligence community and defense establishment devote the time and resources necessary to thoroughly evaluate social media's role as a tool of influence so as to better defend the country and its democratic allies from its most maleficent effects.

Despite the many ills wrought by social media, it still maintains the potential to fulfill its promise of bringing people together for the common good. Although it will require time and significant effort, people can adapt to the challenge of living in an information-rich environment by learning to become comfortable with ambiguity and more deliberative in their thinking. Disinformation and hate speech are likely to maintain an enduring presence online, but societies can be strengthened to withstand their divisive tendencies. The responsible use of social media can still serve to connect individuals separated by distance and illuminate the truth in those corners of the world where autocrats rely on the curtailment of knowledge to sustain their power.

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