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Foreword

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Foreword

Compiling this Reader on Digital Activism in Asia is fraught with compelling challenges, because each of the key terms in the formulation of the title is subject to multiple interpretations and fierce contestations. The construction of 'Asia' as a region, has its historical roots in processes of colonial technologies of cartography and navigation. Asia was both, a measured entity, mapped for resources to be exploited, and also a measure of the world, promising an orientation to the Western World's own turbulent encounters. As Chen Kuan-Hsing points out in his definitive history of the region, Asia gets re-imagined as a 'method' in cold-war conflicts, becoming the territory to be assimilated through exports of different ideologies and cultural purports. Asia does not have its own sense of being a region. The transactions, interactions, flows and exchanges between different countries and regions in Asia have been so entirely mediated by powers of colonisation that the region remains divided and reticent in its imagination of itself. However, by the turn of the 21st century, Asia has seen a new awakening. It finds a regional identity, which, surprisingly did not emerge from its consolidating presence in global economics or in globalised structures of trade and commerce. Instead, it finds a presence, for itself, through a series of crises of governance, of social order, of political rights, and of cultural productions, that binds it together in unprecedented ways.

The digital turn might as well be marked as an Asian turn, because with the new networks of connectivity, with Asian countries marking themselves as informatics hubs, working through a circulated logic of migrant labour and distributed resources, there came a sense of immediacy, proximity, and urgency that continues to shape the Asian imagination in a new way. In the last decade or so, the rapid changes that have emerged, creating multiple registers of modernity, identity, and community in different parts of Asia, accelerated by a seamless exchange of ideas, commodities, cultures, and people have created a new sense of the region as emerging through co-presence rather than competition and conflict. Simultaneously, the emergence of global capitals of information, labour and cultural export, have created new reference points by which the region creates its identities and networks that are no longer subject to the tyranny of Western hegemony. Alternative histories are marking new routes of traffic and uncovering local and contextual histories which have otherwise been subsumed under a postcolonial West versus the Rest rubric, where the rest was always imagined as a monolithic whole. Ironically, the recognition of this diversity, is what allows for an Asian turn to come into being, reshaping the borders of negotiation and boundaries of exchange in the region.

While the digital remains crucial to this shaping of contemporary Asia, both in sustaining the developmental agenda that most of the countries espouse, and in opening up an inward looking gaze of statecraft and social organisation, the digital itself remains an ineffable concept. Largely because the digital is like a blackbox that conflates multiple registers of meaning and layers of life, it becomes important to unengineer it and see what it enables and hides. The economic presence of the digital is perhaps the most visible in telling the story of Asia in the now. Beginning with the dramatic development of Singapore as the centre of informatics governance and the emergence of a range of cities from Shanghai to Manila and Bangalore to Tehran, there has been an accelerated narrative of economic growth and accumulation of capital that is often the global face of the Asian turn. However, this economic reordering is not a practice in isolation. It brings with it, a range of social stirrings that seek to overthrow traditional structures of oppression, corruption, control, and injustice that have often remained hidden in the closed borders of Asian countries. However, the digital marks a particular shift where these questions are no longer being excavated by the ICT4D logic, of the West's attempts to save Asia from itself. These are questions that emerge from the ground, as more people interact with progressive and liberal politics and aspire not only for higher purchase powers but a better quality of rights. The digital turn has opened up a range of social and political rights based discourses, practices, and movements, where populations are holding their governments and countries responsible, accountable, and culpable in the face of personal and collective loss and injustice.

From flash-mobs in Taiwan to organised political demonstrations in India, from Twitter campaigns in Indonesia to cultural protests in Thailand, the range of activities that have emerged, changing the citizen from being a beneficiary of change to becoming an agent of change, have been bewildering and wonderful. The digital interfaces of interaction, peer-2-peer networks of connectivity, real-time documentation and evidence building in the face of crises, and the ability to build autonomous networks of resistance and dialogue have all resulted in extraordinary demonstrations and political movements which shape Asia from within. Additionally, boundaries which were once built to separate, have now become borders that are porous and people learn through viral connections. Thus, one form of protest and organisation immediately takes up a replicating form that gets exercised within different contexts to adapt to specific situations, and bring about dramatic changes that are no longer contingent upon traditional practices of activism. Asian countries that are constantly being challenged by these forms of collectivity that emerge with the digital are caught in a quandary where they invest in the very infrastructure that is used against the neoliberal and developmental logic. The impulse of development and economic growth that the public private partnerships in India had pinned upon the digital is being met with a strong critique

and resistance by the widespread use and penetration of digital technologies. What the digital shall be used for, and what its consequences will be, are both up for speculation and negotiation.

In the face of this multiplicity of digital sites and usages that are reconfiguring Asia, it is obvious then, that the very nature of what constitutes activism is changing as well. Organised civil society presence in Asia has often had a strong role in shaping modern nation states, but more often than not these processes were defined in the same vocabulary as that of the powers that they were fighting against. Marked by a strong sense of developmentalism and often working in complement to the state rather than keeping a check on the state's activities, traditional activism in Asia has often suffered from the incapacity to scale and the inability to find alternatives to the state-defined scripts of development, growth and progress. In countries where literacy rates have been low, these movements also suffer from being conceived in philosophical and linguistic sophistry that escapes the common citizen and remains the playground of the few who have privileges afforded to them by class and region. Digital Activism, however, seems to have broken this language barrier, both internally and externally, allowing for new visualities enabled by ubiquitous computing to bring various stakeholders into the fray. The participants in activist movements, the roles that people play in engaging with political protests, and the very forms of organisation and structure of activism has undergone a significant change.

At the same time, the digital itself has introduced new problems and concerns that are often glossed over, in the enthralling tale of progress. Concerns around digital divide, invasive practices of personal data gathering, the nexus of markets and governments that install the citizen/consumer in precarious conditions, and the re-emergence of organised conservative politics are also a part of the digital turn. Activism has had to focus not only on digital as a tool, but digital also as a site of protest and resistance. New activism, shaped by the presence of pervasive technologies, recognises the technological domains as equally mired in processes of inequality and inequity and are developing tools that make the digital transparent and accountable. Activism of the digital has become as important as activism through the digital, and there is a need to combine the two, so that the human right and the technological right come together to form better modes of living.

Given these polymorphous concepts that we deal with, a Reader on Digital Activism in Asia can always only be a fragmentary and tentative snapshot. This is not an attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the diversity of the region, the multiplicity of practices or the different scales, scopes and temporalities of the changes that Asia is experiencing. The Reader does not offer an index of the momentous emergence with the growth of the digital or a chronological account of how digital activism in Asia has grown and shaped

the region. Instead, the Reader attempts a crowd-sourced compilation that presents critical tools, organisations, theoretical concepts, political analyses, illustrative case-studies and annotations, that an emerging network of change makers in Asia have identified as important in their own practices within their own contexts. In 2014, the Dutch development aid agency Hivos, in collaboration with the Centre for Digital Cultures at the Leuphana University in Germany and the Centre for Internet and Society in Bangalore, India, initiated a project titled 'Making Change' that conceived of a production sprint that brought together 30 activists, artists, theorists, policy actors and other stakeholders from around Asia to reflect on new processes, vocabularies and ideas of making change. Each participant represented wider networks of change making in their regions and brought together expertise and experience that draws from the past to imagine the futures that we live in.

This Reader emerges from the exchanges that were initiated in this production sprint, working with these change makers as they guided us to local, contextual, specific, and particular resources that would help understand their current concerns as well as the ways in which they envision their next steps. The essays in this Reader, then, need to be seen, not as academic resources, but as tools that might help distil lessons and ideas that are in use, with life, in circulation with the change makers that we have been working with. Similarly, as you scan through the book, you will realise that these essays do not have just one vision or one particular usage. A range of editors have read and annotated these essays, to think through what the strengths are and how they would enable new thought and practice in their own contexts. In many ways, this reader is an academic equivalent of a crowd-mapping exercise where multiple on-the-ground participants have provided important snapshots and then a variety of experts have contextualised and framed these snapshots to make them usable and intelligible to their own practice.

Additionally, we were faced with the challenge of what a Reader should include, when it has to account for the multiplicity of practices and the diversity of intentions. If there is one thing that emerges in thinking about Digital Activism, it is the understanding that Digital Activism can only be understood as a 'Wicked Concept'. It remains incommensurable when confined to certain kinds of knowledge systems, and ineffable when not distributed across multiple stakeholders. The power of the digital has been in opening up the silos within which change and activism discourse and practice have often been pushed into, and it was necessary for us to reflect this multi-stakeholder knowledge ecology that helps present a connected, even if not comprehensive view of the field. Thus, unlike traditional Readers which depend on tertiary scholarship and academic publishing, both of which have their valid and important role to play in the knowledge ecosystem but can often be lagging in their interventions and post-facto analyses, this

Reader sees at its core, a variety of different material. Academic scholars and researchers provide leading annotations and critical questions as entry points to all the material. However, the material itself is varied. It includes snapshots of platforms and practices that are not yet analysed in scholarship but stand as strong instances of how digital activism is being shaped and shaping the region. It brings together policy reports and manifestos as they betray the aspirational intersections of activism and governance. It consolidates websites and applications that become symptomatic of the interfaces and interactions of change. It also invites critical scholarship in the field, but the scholarship is also examined as a tool of thought rather than as evidence of knowledge performance. The Reader is imagined as a Swiss Army Knife, with different formats and forms of knowledge producing new functions that a Reader like this can contribute to the very change practices it draws upon.

It gives me great pleasure to present you with this Digital Activism in Asia Reader and hope that it continues to catalyse new conversations and accrue iterative annotations as it enters into new networks of circulation and exchange.

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