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Julie Gilson is a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science & International Studies at the University of Birmingham. She has written extensively on Japanese foreign policy, and is a co-author of *Japan’s International Relations*. In addition, she has worked on Asian regionalism and Asia-Europe relations, with publications including *Asia Meets Europe*. Her current research focuses on civil society in Asia, with a particular emphasis on transnational networks, and on this topic she has published in a variety of edited books and journals, including *Global Society* and *Alternatives*. 
Abstract

The proliferation of digital technology – both as hardware and software - provides opportunities for activist groups around the world to connect with one another more rapidly and efficiently than ever before. And as mobile Internet technology (including smart phones, personal digital assistants and laptops) becomes cheaper and more readily available, the number of services offered to individuals has increased dramatically, including voice communication, Internet browsing and data transfer. At the same time, the rise in transnational advocacy networks means that non-state actors are garnering new voices and challenging both old and new sites of authority, from local governments and state agencies, to regional and international organizations. Based on fieldwork and with a focus on the process of interaction within transnational groups in Southeast Asia, this article adopts a Communities of Practice (COP) approach and applies it to the impact of digital networking, in order to test some of the questions posed about the nature of the so-called technological revolution, and to assess the ways in which technological advancement has affected these groups. It hypothesizes that even new and potentially levelling forms of communication can only respond to and reshape the pre-existing social conditions and organizational structures within which network participants function.
Communicating Practice in Transnational Advocacy: Examples from Southeast Asia

Introduction

The explosion in the usage of new communication technologies across the world since the start of this millennium has brought with it expectations that non-state actors in marginalized communities will gain a voice to influence diverse sites of governance (see van Laer and van Aelst 2009). Indeed, digital media will, according to many observers, have ‘democratising’ or ‘levelling’ effects upon diverse forms of non-state advocacy (Lagorce 2011). Some accounts even suggest that access to new forms of communication can redefine the very space occupied by the ‘activist’ vis-à-vis authority. Transnational advocacy networks are particularly interesting in this regard, as they rely to a large extent on virtual communication (see Carpenter and Jose 2012). These networks bring together nationally based non-state groups to share information and resources and to engage in collective lobbying across state boundaries. For such transnational networks, given their disparate membership and high costs associated with bringing people physically together, one might expect new communication technologies to shape their modes of organization, offering them opportunities simply not attainable through conventional channels of interaction (see Bennett and Toft 2009). This article seeks to question whether we can in fact see the origins of new modes of interaction developing among a number of transnational advocacy networks in Southeast Asia as a result of technological innovation. It examines how new opportunities impact on interaction within transnational advocacy networks; and analyzes whether and how such communication strategies - or their potential – give more people an effective advocacy voice. It hypothesizes that even new and potentially levelling forms of communication only respond to and reshape the pre-existing social conditions within which network participants function, and are

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1 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.
dependent on organizational contexts for determining a network’s ability to embrace ‘digital repertoires’ (Vegh, cited in Lee 2009: 61-2; Chadwick 2007: 294). In spite of the obvious attractions of new technologies, participants in transnational networks may be less likely to embrace such opportunities if they threaten the status quo, require organizational adjustments, or cannot be easily accommodated within existing social frameworks.

The rise of communication technology

Numerous scholars and observers have made assumptions about the potential for communication technologies to enhance the ability of non-state actors to create and extend their networks and even to empower them in their advocacy vis-à-vis governments and other sites of authority. Some analysts note that growing access to the Internet can de facto enhance the transnational character of protests by ‘effectively and rapidly diffusing communication and mobilisation efforts,’ even serving as a means of reconnecting individuals (especially young people) in an era of general political disengagement (van Laer and van Aelst 2009: 230 and 248). As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, more people now have access to the Internet than ever before.

Table 1 Global ICT developments, 2001-2011
Simultaneous to the rise of Internet access has been the far greater availability of the tools for communication. Indeed, the rise in the use of mobile phone technology has been exponential, as shown in Table 2. Thus, not only have we witnessed the phenomenal increase in mobile phone subscriptions in China (from 85,260,000 to a staggering 859,003,000) and in India (from 6,540,000 to 752,190,000), but the percentage of individuals using the Internet in each country has risen from 2.64 to 34.3 and 0.66 to 7.5, respectively.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Mobile cellular subscriptions</th>
<th>% Individuals using the Internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>130547</td>
<td>8150764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>85260000</td>
<td>859003000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPRK</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>431919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>GDP (USD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HK China</td>
<td>5447346</td>
<td>13793729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>6540000</td>
<td>752190000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>6520947</td>
<td>220000000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>74819158</td>
<td>120708670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea (Rep)</td>
<td>29045596</td>
<td>50767241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>29545</td>
<td>4003395</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>7385000</td>
<td>33859000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
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<td>594000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>742606</td>
<td>99185844</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<td>79895646</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2991600</td>
<td>7384600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
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<td>27839527</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timor-Leste</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>600600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1251195</td>
<td>154000000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on ITU World Telecommunication /ICT Indicators database

This proliferation of digital technology – both as hardware and software – can provide opportunities for existing activist groups to expand their membership and reach, and for previously excluded groups and individuals to make heard their own voices. Moreover, as mobile Internet technology (including smart phones, personal digital assistants and laptops) becomes cheaper and more readily available, far more individuals are able to access a wide range of services, from voice communication to Internet browsing and data transfer (Srinuan et al. 2012: 254). Thus, for example, a would-be participant at an international conference no longer has to try and raise the airfare for a face-to-face encounter or be dependent on
international organizations to fund her participation. At the click of a mouse activists can locate and engage in discussion with many groups sharing the same concerns, regardless of nationality and geography. In addition, where invitations to join transnational groups often derive from existing personal networks and contacts, information available on the Internet now enables groups to find like-minded others across borders and to invite them to join in a cost-free virtual network. Feixa et al., in their work comparing and contrasting ‘old’ and what they call ‘new new’ social movements, find that new technology facilitates the development of ‘multi-scalar’ movements, enabled to function at a range of sites simultaneously because ‘local initiatives diffuse transnationally, while global events manifest themselves in diverse local contexts’ (2009: 438). Lee witnesses tremendous change in Korean social movements, as ‘netizens have utilized the Internet for resource mobilization, virtual struggles, and alternative knowledge production for progressive civic action’ (2009); whilst Aday and Livingston show that technological opportunities also change the nature of civil society’s relationship with the press (2008). Examining the World Social Forum, Juris explains how the role of new technologies creates more ‘flexible, dispersed, and horizontal networks’ able to articulate alternative visions of the world, thus speaking directly to the diffused spatial loci of contemporary activists (2005: 271). Some commentators go as far as to claim that through the Internet activists are able to develop ‘virtual counter-public spheres,’ by which they can ‘circumvent, resist, and rebuke mainstream ideology’ (Downey and Fenton 2003: 198). These accounts suggest that access to new forms of communication can reshape the spaces occupied by activists as they become situated within a less traditionally structured framework. For some observers, we are even witnessing ‘digital democratisation’ in progress (Lagorce 2011).

At the same time, however, it is worth bearing in mind the still resonant views of Mynatt et al., who outline the ways in which network communities are a ‘technosocial construct that
requires understanding of both the technology and the sociality embodying them’ (1998: 123). Many other authors also caution against over-excitement at the prospect of what IT can deliver, and Calhoun is one of many who reminds us that IT is ‘introduced into a world of existing social relations, culture, capitalism and inequalities’ (2004: 237). In their analysis of mobile Internet access in Thailand, Srinuan et al. demonstrate that the transition from fixed to wireless communication technology has the potential to transcend the digital divide and to leapfrog traditional technological developments (2012). However, they also illustrate ongoing barriers to access, including price and demographic determinants, which not always straightforward to surmount where there is embedded socio-economic inequality. Focusing on e-participation in a variety of social networking fora, the work of Sæbø et al. finds principally that non-location based ‘social networking tools facilitate dialogue and the coordination of political action,’ thereby enhancing, but not superseding, already existing forms of activity (2009). Like the other works cited, they see both the potential and current limitations inherent in wireless networking, finding that more training and investment is required in order to maximize the potential for digital communication for activist groups. Mann thus concludes that ‘Internet services are merely an innovation of traditional civil society tactics’ (2008: 10), whilst, among other factors, Linchuan Qiu outlines the fact that successful mobile networking tends to be based on ‘existing political struggles’ (2008: 39). Van Laer goes further, finding that digital communication ‘narrows the mobilizing potential to a public of experienced, organizationally embedded activists’ (2010: 412), whilst Papacharissi stresses the continued need for physical engagement and sees no panacea in the ‘disembodied exchange of text’ (2002: 17). Morell, too, believes that the restructuring of space by digital communication can lead to a ‘fragmentation’ and ‘decentralization of participation’ (2009: 22). Amongst these various assessments, it is instructive to heed Lee’s advice to break down the binary division between ‘new’ and ‘old’ media, and to clarify the
distinction between them (2009: 34). In reflecting on the value of different kinds of communication media, then, we need to examine the choices of particular communication options by particular individuals and groups for particular purposes at particular moments.

**Technological literacy in Southeast Asia**

States in Southeast Asia recognize the importance of increased Internet access and technological literacy for their future economic success, and the need to combat the digital divide across regions has been on the political agenda for some time. As far back as 2000, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched its e-ASEAN Framework Agreement, following which ASEAN established working groups to meet the four objectives of the Framework Agreement; namely, developing competitiveness in the IT sector; closing the digital divide between and within nations; promoting cooperation between public and private spheres; and developing the ASEAN Information Infrastructure (www.aseansec.org/6269.htm). Since then, there have been numerous initiatives, including the 2011 proposal by a number of states within ASEAN to develop an undersea cable to connect Borneo and Mindanao, thereby linking the members of the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East ASEAN Growth Area (www.mb.com.ph/node/326136/under). Regional activities have been accompanied by bilateral endeavours, such as the South Korean government funding of Cambodia’s digital development (Lagorce 2011). Such state-led initiatives have fuelled the ‘wild fire’ of wireless communication in Asia, although the costs of such developments remain high in low-income states (Jussawalla 2002), particularly as issues such as accessibility, availability and affordability continue to impede uniform access for all (Gunasekaran and Harmantzis 2007). These factors suggest that the underlying socio-political context continues to impact upon the possibility for all individuals to take part in
virtual democratization, and that we cannot simply assume that the availability of communication technology translates to its widespread, effective use.

Since the late 1990s, the focus on transnational activism has increased across the world, and it is frequently regarded either as a stepping stone towards a globalized framework (in the form of what some already discern to be a ‘global civil society,’ see Anheier et al. 2001), or as a site of resistance against the harsher effects of globalization (Featherstone 2003). As far back as 1999, Keck and Sikkink captured this phenomenon in their work on ‘transnational advocacy networks,’ defined as ‘those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and a dense exchange of information and services.’ Central to their work was a focus on networks as structures of communication that have the potential to transform the very ‘terms and nature of the debate’ (1999: 82 and 90). Based on preliminary fieldwork conducted in late 2010 and early 2011, I draw examples from transnational advocacy networks based in Southeast Asia, to apply Communities of Practice literature to test some of the questions posed about the nature of the so-called technological revolution. In so doing, I assess the ways in which technological advancement has affected the ability of these networks to enhance membership and develop new strategies through intensified communication. This approach enables us to assess the ways in which

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2 Interviewees were selected for: representing either the secretariat or significant members of the main transnational advocacy networks within Southeast Asia, with members from at least three states; having an institutional persona; existing for ten years or more; and addressing a wide remit (such as the environment or women). The selected networks, although they may have been initiated by international agencies such as the Food and Agricultural Organisation, are not simply ‘Asian’ chapters of international organizations like Oxfam, but derive from local initiatives. Based on these criteria the secretariats for each network were approached and interviewed directly, by telephone or through email correspondence. Significant participants within each network were identified through the founding members, the output of documents and through reputation, as uncovered by interviews and cross referenced with other participants. Senior representatives from each group were identified and interviewed, but as most wished to remain anonymous their comments are not attributed personally. I focused on Bangkok, Manila and New Delhi, where most significant participants are found. The groups interviewed were (in Delhi) the ILC, SEACON, the Renee Foundation for Women Empowerment, the Social Development Foundation, Focus on the Global South, the Gandhi Peace Foundation, Wada no Todo Abhiyan and the Indian Social Action Forum; (in Manila) ANGOC, Reclaiming Rural Agriculture and Food Sovereignty Action, Information Resource Management Division, Philippine Commission on Women in Transnational Work, Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, ISIS, and the Philippine Partnership for the
the processes of engagement among advocacy groups are affected by new communication technologies, rather than focusing on their constituent groups. In addition, by examining transnational networks as communities of practice, we are able to situate the use of technology within the social contexts of participants and to posit that, despite their obvious tremendous potential, technological developments in these cases are regarded as a second line of strategy whilst more traditional forms of communication remain significant.

Communities of practice

In 1991 Lave and Wenger coined the term ‘communities of practice’ to refer to a ‘group of individuals participating in communal activity, and experiencing/continuously creating their shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities’ (Wenger 1998a; Lave and Wenger 1991). Adler brought Wenger’s ideas into the realm of International Relations, enabling us principally to comprehend the ‘social space where structure and agency overlap and where knowledge, power, and community intersect’ (2008: 199). He cites the need to take into account not only those practices, background knowledge and environment that ‘make possible political actors’ socialization and persuasion and ultimately their rational calculation,’ but also the acquisition of new material, such as new communication technology (Adler 2008: 196; see Hopf 2010: 542). Importantly, the focus here is on social practices, ensuring that communities of practice are not necessarily ‘congruent with the reified structures of institutional affiliations, divisions and boundaries’ (Wenger, 1998a: 118–9).

For Wenger, if all change involves a process of learning, then effective change facilitates a negotiation of meaning, which occurs through reification and participation. Reification Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (PhilDHRRA); (in Bangkok) People’s Empowerment, SEAWWATCH, and Thai Women’s Watch. I also attended a one-day workshop hosted by Thai Women’s Watch, bringing together domestic and transnational groups.
involves taking that which is abstract and turning it into a ‘congealed’ form, represented for example in documents and symbols. It is the other side of the coin to participation, which involves participants not just in translating the reified description/prescription into embodied experience, but in recontextualising its meaning’ (Wenger 1998b). Technological innovation can have an impact on both elements. Advancing Wenger’s position and applying work drawn from beyond the workplace, it is important to qualify these two dimensions. First, scholars like McChesney caution that the ‘digital divide maintains online political discourse as the privilege of dominant elite groups’ (cited in Lee 2009); whilst Kole enumerates several reasons for which people remain ‘unwired’ (2001). Thus, the very choice of documents added to the Internet can influence behaviour; and dominant voices can become the standard bearers for information and goals. For these reasons, it is worth incorporating the dimension of selectivity to that of reification, and cautioning against the automatic reflex that makes close and apparently obvious links between IT advancement and any levelling of the activist playing field. Second, as Warf and Grimes find, the impact of technological advancement on the constantly (re)negotiated social product that is space can in practice diffuse power (cited in Lee 2009: 46; see also Lefebvre 2009; and Gilson 2011). For this reason too, participation needs to be seen alongside fragmentation, the subdivision of groups, leading to the establishment of ‘global villages’ (Lee 2009: 41-2 and 120). The effects of technology on these four dimensions will be examined below.

**Digital networking**

Communities of practice essentially serve as portals for information; using information to ‘retain knowledge in “living” ways’ … and provide particular identities’ (Wenger 1998b: 4). Thus, communities create connections among people, which are facilitated by technology. A number of scholars apply a digital network approach to show how interactions among agents
transcend political and geographical boundaries through the medium of web-based information (see Katz and Anheier 2006; Jackson 1997). Adler’s work, too, includes a focus on the ways in which communities of practice require the ‘mobilization of organizational and material resources’ (2008: 201 and 204). The Internet and digital media can in these ways be used to gather, coordinate and disseminate information and to mobilize online action. They may also serve additional purposes, by creating sites to ‘produce and disseminate alternative knowledge and cultural frames’ (Lee 2009: 62), developing new virtual worlds with their particular forms of reification and selectivity, participation and fragmentation. In these ways, the changing use of technology for communication can alter the processes of interaction and behaviour of activists (Mann 2003: 4).

Chadwick describes digital network repertoires, which are characterized by a number of principles. First, they encourage online civic action, thereby blurring the distinction between ‘being a citizen online’ and ‘being a citizen offline.’ Second, they foster ‘distributed trust’ across horizontally linked citizen groups, by creating a virtual community that is more decentralized. Third, new software enables individuals to ‘subvert, manipulate, and recontextualize original images to instigate civic action.’ And finally, digital networks build upon ‘sedimentary online networks,’ which means that old networks or organizations are being revivified to address new areas of concern and interest (Chadwick 2007: 294). However, these new forms of interaction and practices map onto the other spaces of human life, such as physical, psychological and emotional spaces (Mynatt et al. 1998: 153), and for this reason it is difficult to predict the outcome of particular technological change. Tensions are best summarized by regarding the effects of IT change within two spheres: Internet-enhanced activities use the Internet as additional means of communication for traditional forms of advocacy, to mobilize or organize existing structures; and Internet-based activities
represent ‘activities that are only possible online, like a virtual sit-in or hacking into target Web sites,’ thereby creating ‘new modes of collective action’ (Vegh, cited in Lee 2009: 61-2). Van Laer and van Aelst suggest that both the “‘old” repertoire, supported by the Internet, and the “new” or modified online tactics concatenate in a new “digitalised” social movement repertoire of collective action’ (2009: 232).

Once connected, it is only through learning ‘netiquette’ that one can ‘become an experienced user or “netizen”’ (Kole 2001, cited in Mann 2003: 8). Thus, the mere availability of digital network tools does not guarantee their application. The outcome of engagement may be summarized in Mann’s distinction between communication and ‘strategic communication,’ which indicates that networks are engaged in a systematic effort to maximize technology, by developing new modes of communication, engaging with particular digital repertoires and particular forms of information or even becoming ‘super activists,’ thereby utilizing the Internet in an enhanced way as a tool for achieving goals, rather than simply as an instrument for achieving traditional goals (2003: 5; see van Laer 2010). There is optimism that intensive and enhanced interactivity leads to more democratic participation and cross-cultural understanding (see Langman 2005), and that technology can help to overcome some of the ‘well-documented challenges of incorporating “grassroots” input and participation into international development initiatives’ (see Eade and Pearce 2000). In practice, however, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest principally recreational, rather than instrumental, use of new technologies (Liu 2010; Jung 2012). Moreover, ‘digital connectivity does not necessarily overcome challenges of participation and representation’ (Mann 2003: 3), and the use of the Internet ‘might indeed reinforce existing inequalities among the activists participating in protest actions’ (van Laer 2010). Combining communities of practice with digital networking literatures, then, we should be better able to evaluate the impact of the
changing means of developing interactive processes and to begin to re-assess the nature of the space occupied by transnational processes. The following section illustrates a number of transnational groups within Southeast Asia and assesses the ways in which the amended framework of Wenger’s reification/selectivity and participation/fragmentation is affected by technology, with a focus on Mann’s distinction between communication and strategic communication.

**Examples from Southeast Asia**

In 2010-2011 as part of a pilot study into communication and activism in Asia, I conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with participants of the most internationally active, multi-issue transnational advocacy groups in Southeast Asia. As noted in footnote one, the three locations of Delhi, Manila and Bangkok were selected because of the number of groups and networks housed in these cities, and all networks selected have a long history, broad membership and wide remit. Although the domestic context within which participant individuals groups and networks function is important, the purpose of the present study is to examine the changing role of communication technology within the processes and channels of interaction themselves. The networks interviewed included the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform (ANGOC), which lobbies for the reform of institutions that affect rural communities around the region by ‘developing, disseminating and mainstreaming innovative, people-centered development agenda and experiences’ (www.angoc.org). Established in 1979 and with a secretariat in Quezon City in the Philippines, it now involves twenty regional and national non-governmental organisation (NGO) networks across Asia. A 1989 meeting in Manila on environmentally sustainable development led to the creation of a new transnational group including ANGOC and partners; namely, the Southeast Asia Consortium for People’s Participation in Environmentally Sustainable Development (SEACON). This overlapping of
interest typifies many of the transnational groups. In addition, the International Land Coalition issued from a 1995 Conference on Hunger and Poverty in Brussels, and serves to empower the rural poor, with a particular emphasis on land access (www.landcoalition.org). It is international in its reach and membership, with a specific Asian arm to its activities, housed within ANGOC. Asia Pacific Women’s Watch (APWW) is a regional women’s network with a secretariat in Colombo, Sri Lanka, designed to monitor and promote gender mainstreaming, based on justice for women. Established in 1991, it is a widely dispersed network focused on the work of the United Nations and centred on the work of the Pan Pacific South East Women’s Association of Thailand (PPSEAWA), the Asia Caucus and Isis International, bolstered by major UN women’s events and seeking to monitor the Beijing Platform for Action (www.apww-slwngo.org). Bangkok-based Forum Asia focuses on human rights and, set up in 1991, now has 46 member organizations throughout Asia (www.forum-asia.org). Other groups examined included the Asia-Europe People’s Forum, which was established to convey the voices of non-state actors alongside the state-led Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM, www.aepf.info). All of these groups are transnational in character, involving three or more domestically based NGOs or other groups registered in different states. They all reflect certain aspects of ‘Asian’ membership, either as the arm of an international forum, or promoting a particular geographical range. However, the definition of ‘Asian’ among these groups is both varied and fluid, and for some it holds more significance than for others. In addition, the remit of each of these groups is very broad: focusing on human rights, women or the environment, they are able to accommodate a plethora of localized demands beneath a comprehensive umbrella label.

In recent years, some of the domestic groups participating in these transnational fora have taken advantage of the digital media revolution, by creating more comprehensive websites,
using Facebook, Twitter, and Rss feeds for presenting written and visual materials. For example, Phildrira has a Luzon blog providing news update, detailing relevant recent projects or events; whilst the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines has a professional-looking website and is linked to groups worldwide through its participation in the open Facebook group, Free All Political Prisoners, which it uses to announce the release of prisoners from time to time and to keep up the message about those political detainees still being held. Wada no Todo in Delhi has a scrolling newsfeed at the top of its webpages, whilst the Gandhi Foundation has a Facebook presence at The Gandhi Foundation and a Twitter account at @GandhiUK. Both accounts engage in philosophical discussions about Gandhi’s legacies, as well as disseminating information about the Foundation’s work, and they have Rss feeds for the same purpose. Two points are worth noting: many other groups (such as Thai Women’s Watch) have no web presence, whilst those already mentioned tend to use virtual environments simply to disseminate text-based materials. These trends mirror the transnational networks themselves.

Transnational networks tend to be based where there are fewer Internet restrictions, although in India for example, Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF) is fighting the growing tide of Internet censorship. They often have secretariats or some limited dedicated resources, and may therefore be assumed to be better equipped than their constituents to make greater use of the Internet. For its part, ANGOC services an active and comprehensive website; it holds all the usual information about members, organizational structures, programmes and events and links, and also has an innovative ‘Portal’ of easily searchable library archives. This provide a set of resources for a range of topics, including food security and agrarian reform and access to land, and it can be added to (in local languages) by any of ANGOC’s members or partners. However, ANGOC – unlike the ILC which is housed in its offices – does not have a
Facebook or Twitter presence. It uses communication technology – as many of its constituent group representatives suggested – as a means of speeding up pre-existing arrangements and relationships and to meet with other groups virtually, thereby not incurring significant travel costs. Several interviewees suggested that those who have mobile technology use it simply as a more efficient means of keeping in touch. The ILC is in a different position, as it is a regional node of an international organization. Nevertheless, the Asia ILC has a distinct identity and uses a host of web-based platforms to disseminate information, as part of its comprehensive website. It was set up in 2009, and established a Facebook group in November 2011. In the same manner as ANGOC, though, it uses Facebook principally as a means of conveying the same information – in the same format – as is found on its web pages. To date, these pages have not been used for discussion, but act as a repository for information about events, campaign alerts, and documents such as the land matrix, a database of land deals within specific regions and across the world (http://landportal.info/landmatrix). In addition, the Asia ILC houses a ‘Blogroll,’ which in fact simply redirects the visitor to the webpages of the ILC, Land Watch Asia and ANGOC. The same information is provided on Twitter, to maximize the social networking exposure of material otherwise found in hard copy.

Groups interviewed noted that the central organization of the transnational network creates a locus for very lively interaction, and the representative of AVARD suggested that these groups would not come together otherwise. In turn, ANGOC utilizes web-based communication to render interaction more uniform and sustainable and thereby to capitalize on the work of face-to-face meetings. The centralized organizational framework of the transnational groups themselves ensures that there is a sustainable point of reference and collective memory housed within the headquarters of the transnational group. Thus, for
example, ANGOC’s Agrarian Reform and Access to Land project has a third country training programme with information for users in other countries, which it disseminates through its website in the form of a pdf manual. Another example of valuable information shared is the 3D resource mapping of villagers provided by the Philippine Association for Intercultural Development and utilized by the Indian Social Development Foundation (SDF). The SDF (working within ANGOC and the ILC) subsequently wrote a funding proposal based on that model to map 200 villages in India, thereby saving it time and money by being able to adapt a model used previously in a different country setting but addressing similar problems. The information is made available on the ANGOC website (see www.angoc.org/portal/publications/EAPLCPR/ch7/ch7p07.pdf). The websites themselves of course are able to provide a detailed history of and contact information for, each group. All of the groups frequently post photos of their leaders or eminent members, those speaking at particular functions and visiting guests. Perhaps less centrally displayed are the grassroots groups they represent, although information – and visual materials – about them is available in the ‘programme’ or ‘project’ sections of their websites.

The most significant finding of the interviews is the continued importance of face-to-face contact, both for establishing and maintaining contacts. For example, SEAWWatch in the APWW functions as a particularly influential network of politically connected, elite women, through personal and familial ties. The ISIS representative noted that relations can only be nourished over coffee and through developing real-time human connections; whilst one interviewee reflected openly on a particular Asian culture of mutual respect that is constructed through the long-term development of real-life interpersonal relations. Such encounters may be facilitated by the actions of a third party, notably UN agencies. The Thai groups in the APWW met one another at the UN women’s conference in Beijing and from
that point developed a mutual interest in working together. The INSAF representative explained that they have no money for foreign travel, and that they are reliant on being invited and sponsored to participate in international fora, for example the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun in November 2010. The virtual transnational forum for him does not replace physical meetings, but it does create new links and announces solidarity over issues such as debt. It serves for him a functional purpose, but he stressed that digital media cannot bind participating groups together in transnational frameworks.

Most of the interviewees referred to the dominance of the English language in transnational groups: not only is this the lingua franca of international engagement, it also favours those with common English language usage, like Indians or Filipinos. For that reason, the Indian representatives, according to one SDF representative, tend to group within a South Asian consortium. She went on to observe that their efforts to share information and ideas with Southeast Asian peers are hampered by communication problems, and that therefore the only meaningful way to make important connections with them is through sustainable one-to-one encounters. The benefit for the individual groups of participating within ANGOC is that it structures and creates new channels for communication, for example by ensuring that each group is represented at the podium in major events. On those occasions, moreover, the SDF often assists in training counterparts from other countries in presentation skills, by using tools like PowerPoint. As the ISIS representative also observed, not only can those with English participate more effectively, but they can also function more confidently in representing the interests of the transnational groups to international fora. This can lead to exclusivity and the dominance of certain agendas within particular groups. In the same way, donor-driven issues such as the Millennium Development Goals dominate agenda; whilst technology – based as it is on English – further discriminates in favour of those with appropriate Internet access and
‘netiquette.’ People’s Empowerment find the language issue to be a key problem, especially as documents created at the transnational level (for example, by ASEAN) were not previously regularly translated into Thai for the targeted groups on the ground to be able to understand what is being done on their behalf. People’s Empowerment successfully put pressure on the Thai government to remedy this, and has also sought to assist in the communication of policy to disabled groups by providing materials in Braille. Other languages in the region, such as Indonesia and Khmer, have yet to have these provisions.

As well as using websites and linking them to social media, interviewees indicated that new communication technology facilitates more frequent personal contact, notably through mobile phones and Skype. ANGOC utilizes Skype in order to prepare for meetings and to ensure equity in representation, as agreed by all members. Participant groups, including representatives of the TFDP (in Forum Asia) and MODE (in SEACON), generally observed that their own lack of resources to facilitate face-to-face encounters with colleagues from outside the Philippines ensured that they make the most of email and Skype. The MODE representative also noted how teleconferencing became increasingly important in the 2010s, in light of the fact that the funds it received throughout the 1990s and 2000s had been severely reduced, thereby restricting the mobility of its members. For them, technology enables the ‘global distribution’ of information about their remit and activities. As TFDP often has to respond to emergency cases in other states, moreover, they need to be able to communicate directly in order to structure their help, for example, to assist in getting someone out of Sri Lanka and accommodate them in Manila. People’s Empowerment in Bangkok observed that they are seeking to train the members of their own organization and to distribute second hand laptops (as they rely solely on donations) once volunteers have set them up. Indeed, the continuing reality for many participating groups is that computers
remain a luxury. Thus, for example, similar to People’s Empowerment, the SDF in its Delhi office has two small old desktops in a small, ill-equipped basement room. For these reasons, the wherewithal to engage fully in interactive networking is not always a given.

These preliminary findings demonstrate how digital media tend to enhance the ways in which existing forms of communication and information are expressed and transmitted. Digital media can lead to the reification of learning materials, which become standardized and replicated throughout the transnational structure, and become the normative default for terminology and systems applied. At the same time, the process is selective, as demonstrated by the elite nature of the politically connected, increasingly professionalized, English speaking and Internet savvy participants, who are able to post their own versions of events and approaches. Thus, the organized leadership and committee elite have a larger place on the Internet spectrum and their own selectivity is solidified. This creates the possibility that digitalization further excludes the already marginalized, rather than closing the digital divide as many would predict. Similarly, Wenger’s participation is borne out in the greater accessibility for the participating groups to the wealth of information and experience provided by others, facilitated by the overarching structures of the transnational domain. The digital world provides a potential space for new and more extensive participation, and the latter is evident in our cases, although new digital media has not really opened opportunities to new members. At the same time, moreover, fragmentation occurs as the English language, international exposure and netiquette are needed for the effective use of digital media and sub-groups form to exploit it most effectively.

**Conclusion**
The proliferation of cheaper communication technologies offers the potential for instant interaction among a diverse and dispersed set of groups interested in lobbying for change or advocating collectively vis-à-vis various sites of authority. However, this preliminary investigation into several transnational advocacy networks in Southeast Asia demonstrates that we should be wary of making reflex assumptions about the ‘democratising’ or ‘levelling’ effects of digital media upon such networks, and that we need to question whether we can in fact see the origins of ‘an entirely new mode of engaging social movements’ to date (Lee 2009: 50). The foregoing sample suggests that there is a growing use of communication technology to supplement pre-existing modes of interaction. Internet-based communication among these networks offers a convenient and accessible portal for a range of different kinds of information and documentation: from announcements about courses and meetings; to pdf files of reports and speeches. In other words, new forms of communication enable the groups interviewed to put into digitized media the information previously available in hard copy and to make it available to a global audience. To date the main area of innovation has been in the use of Internet tools to present complex, large and updatable data, such as the village mapping exercise. The findings of this initial survey bear out Calhoun’s assertion that IT maps onto existing frames of engagement, in particular as the digitized world is more open and available to pre-existing groups and does not – in the cases selected here –provide new opportunities for grassroots engagement (2004: 237). The activities signal a range of Internet-enhanced possibilities, while the level of Internet-based activity remains low, as participating groups do not engage – as campaigns and social movements might – in spontaneous and/or organic use of digital communication (see Langman 2005; Juris 2007).

The networks examined here suggest that, as Gillan finds, new technologies map on to the particular milieux within which a group or network already exists, and we need to understand
the multiple factors which constitute how particular activists learn and (re-)form the communities of practice they inhabit (2008). For this reason, we should not be seduced by the promise of ‘whiz-bang hi-tech’ and its ability to transform behaviour, but should rather examine the insertion of novel forms of IT into the banal realities of daily communication (Downing 2005: 218). As face-to-face encounters remain fundamental for the groups interviewed, in order both to establish and consolidate ties with likeminded groups, many civil society groups have not replaced traditional methods of campaigning (Lebert 2003). Instead, they tend to adapt pre-existing strategies in a conservative approach to what Meikle labels ‘backing into the future’ (cited in Surman and Reilly 2003: 47). These modest findings suggest that the proliferation of technological tools does not in fact create a blanket democratizing force or give equal voice to those who were previously disenfranchized. Where networks are already tapped into channels of communication with the loci of authority they seek to influence – and where they are already defined as the ‘civil society’ contact for a range of international organizations – they do not need to find innovative approaches and strategies for engagement. It therefore seems premature to claim that ‘alternative globalization’ is under way as a result of the application of new IT (Kahn and Kellner 2005), and is more appropriate to focus on the strategic priorities of the transnational organizing structures and the constituent member groups. They may not always be best served by opening novel channels of communication so long as limitations like resources, strategic interests and the English language and netiquette remain in place.

Returning to Wenger’s categories, we can see a gradual shift in the reification, selectivity, participation and fragmentation by transnational networks. Processes and behaviour become streamlined – Skype becomes the norm and digital mapping techniques are rolled out across the region – and participating network members come to adopt new forms of netiquette and
more uniform strategies for communication. Moreover, whilst face-to-face contact remains important, the Internet nevertheless bolsters relationships by providing regular updates about activities, sharing information and data and coalescing through the reification of certain elements of practice. At the same time, selectivity occurs as both the central network coordinators and the most influential participant groups impose their models for communication. Those with English language strengths are particularly privileged, and Chadwick’s assumptions of dissolving hierarchies are not achieved in practice. Moreover, the selection of institutional memories – through documents, speeches, Youtube clips or photographs and other visual formats – embodies a particular history of the network, often focusing on the network level rather than highlighting individual group experiences and concerns. These effects of reification and selectivity can influence whether increased participation or fragmentation will occur. Greater access to digital media may facilitate increased exposure to other network members and even greater influence in shaping the network, but it is also possible that fragmentation will occur, whereby less well resourced or less influential participating groups are further isolated by new digital opportunities. We see Chadwick’s ‘sedimentary online networks’ being used to strengthen and reinforce old relationships, rather than to develop new ones (2007: 294).

Whilst the examples cited here suggest that we are not yet witnessing the redefinition of public space, the evidence in this small survey that technology is not yet moving into an Internet-based phase should not negate the potential for it to do so (see Castells 2007). The mechanisms for Internet-based activities already exist; the milieu and the imagination have not yet sought to exploit them. When they do, the relationship between physical and virtual space will be (re-)defined in new ways and we need to be ready to understand them. It remains to be seen, however, whether this process of building modern communities continues
to exclude the marginalized, and much will depend on the ability of target groups themselves
to get hold of, and use effectively, contemporary IT. Will instruments such as smartphones
become more readily available, transforming the ways activists work and signalling the
demise of the dingy basement office? Researchers need to turn their attention to charting the
ways in which different types of non-state actors across multiple geographies, and from
advocacy groups to campaigns and social movements, exploit and manage new
communication tools and opportunities and how they both affect, and are affected by, the
socio-cultural and organizational contexts in which they find themselves.

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