

Editorial Foreword

It is a pleasure to introduce this second issue of the enterprising new journal, IKAT: The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies. It is breaking new ground in opening Indonesia to its region, and establishing a high standard of scholarly publication in English.

It is good to see Southeast Asians taking up the challenge of understanding their own region. As the Orientalist tradition of Europe weakens, institutions and individuals in the region must take up the challenge of understanding, preserving and analyzing Southeast Asian cultures, many of them endangered. Southeast Asian Studies must return to Southeast Asia, and IKAT is certainly helping this process.

Eva Rapaport's evocative description of the Javanese spirit possession, for example, is a nice example of a conscientious description of an endangered Javanese cultural phenomenon, poised between ritual and performance. As against that piece of timeless cultural research, we have some very contemporary concerns.

A Bangladeshi scholar, Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, surveys the background to the Rohingya crisis, while Novita Dewi offers an introduction to some recently trendy postcolonial literature.

The three other papers, fully half this issue, venture into the vital frontier of social media. We know that the astonishing switch to virtually free, instant, electronic communication is transforming our societies. The transition appears particularly rapid and profound in Southeast Asia, where the culture of print media was never as established as in other parts of Asia or Europe, while the new electronic media are massively popular. Is this Southeast Asia's opportunity to leapfrog print-oriented societies into a bright new future, or does it rather present an unprecedented danger of rootless surges of superficial fashion or partisan hate? We don't know, but IKAT has done well to take a chance on these three experiments in how to research the phenomenon.

Indah Santi Pratidina, a new PhD from Hitotsubashi, has mastered Japanese well enough to plough through 316,000 tweets in Japanese language - no mean feat when as she points out a 140-character tweet can convey three times as much information in Japanese characters as in Roman ones. Of course the task would be impossible without algorithms that pick out some key words. While we can't learn much this way

about what the Japanese net-uyoku are thinking, she can tell us what countries and themes relating to ASEAN they may be interested in.

Mukda Pratheepwatanawong devoted her Nottingham doctoral dissertation to digital canvassing for votes in Bangkok by means of Facebook. She perceives some continuities between the way networks of influence operated in what is now seen as 'traditional' electoral politics (it seems only yesterday), but also marked differences. Candidates with weak party structures and few followers can reach a surprisingly large audience by radiating Facebook circles. What is more, the campaign slogans can be made to seem like 'something spoken by a friend'. But measuring how much impact this has on actual votes remains an area demanding much more research.

David Robie a Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Auckland University of Technology, is the most established of the contributors to this issue. His is not only an observer but an active participant in the changes digitalization is bringing to the ways we are informed. This is a strong piece of advocacy for combining academic analysis with advocacy, exposing stories of oppression that the struggling traditional media are no longer in a position to deal with. He argues that the rise of populist 'democratators' intolerant of factual journalism, together with the impoverishment and increasing concentration of traditional media in a few hands, have reduced or even destroyed the capacity of the print media 'to carry out their Fourth Estate function.' He seeks to fill this gap with free, independent digital news sources such as his own institution's Asia Pacific Report.

These three articles are a far cry from the older emphasis of area studies on history and culture. They raise profound questions about what is happening to societies, politics and the knowledge industry in the digital revolution, and how we can develop the right tools to analyze those changes. The daily tweets, posts and blogs are now in the millions, whereas a scholar of old Javanese literature might spend a lifetime studying a couple of texts. This is on the positive side a great democratization -- everyone can have their say. On the negative, we appear to be losing the confidence in distinguishing truth from falsehood, quality from rubbish, advocacy from prejudice. Will 'big data', and the new tools for analyzing it, lift the knowledge industry to new heights of inclusiveness, where the opinions of all can be weighed and sifted? Will 'peer review' itself, the vital tool of scholarship, become more democratized, or simply lose its effectiveness?

I do not know the answers to any of these questions, but I do congratulate IKAT for raising them. I wish the journal well as it moves boldly out into uncharted, often stormy, waters.

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