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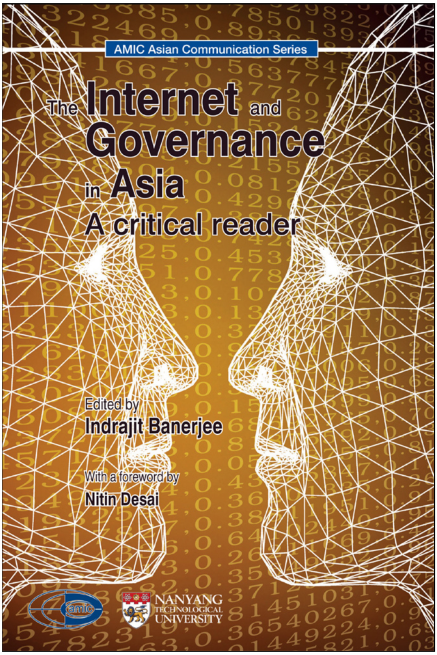
Terrorism section weakens primer on e-policy

The Internet and Governance in Asia: A critical reader, edited by Indrajit Banerjee. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC), Nanyang Technological University, 2007, 384 pp. ISBN 981-4136-02-6



THE EDITOR describes this book as a first ever attempt to map the impact of the internet on key aspects of governance within Asia: democratisation, e-government, cybersecurity and terrorism, technical coordination, internet policy and regulation. The subtitle of the book also suggests that these matters will be critically evaluated.

As I will demonstrate, some contributors fulfil this brief while others do not. The first section on internet and democracy begins promisingly. Eric Loo's opening chapter argues that the internet has dual possibilities. It allows autonomous groups to challenge the governments grip on political discourse at the same time as it expands government capacities for the surveillance of public expression.

Drawing upon Asian examples, Loo contends that the internet's democratic capabilities are shaped not by technology but by the culture and politics of use. Morris Jones chapter adds weight to this contention. The Australian experience, he argues, shows that politicians and citizens are largely indifferent to internet facilitated civic activities.

Randolph Kluver's chapter considers the issue of democracy in terms of the internet's disparate functions. Clearly, it is a vehicle for political and social conversation among individuals and groups. However, Kluver maintains that internet architectures are more closely aligned to the construction of data bases; a logic which enables governance rather than democratisation.

The second section outlines the technical frameworks and purposes of e-government within the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, Madanmohan Rao presents a series of parameters for assessing e-government: connectivity, content, community, commerce, capacity, culture, co-operation and capital. On the basis of these parameters, Rao classifies e-governments of the region into six developmental types types: restrictive, embryonic emerging, negotiating, intermediate and mature.

Didar Singh's chapter on India evaluates e-governance in terms of its capacity to promote economic development. Similarly, Phil Kwon Sun's chapter considers how e-government in South Korea has enhanced national economic development. Although all contributors provide well researched explications of e-government, normative evaluations (say, in terms of the democratic principles mentioned in section one) are minimal or non-existent.

Section three on cyber security and terrorism belongs in a military intelligence manual rather than a university published academic text. None of the contributors bother to define key terms, namely 'terrorism' and 'security'. Consequently, terrorist activities are exclusively associated with oppositional anti-state networks and state terrorism becomes a non-category.

Similarly, 'security' is assumed to be a problem for states (and their populations) rather than for populations against the state. Thus Shyam Tekwani's case study of the online networks associated with Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is hopelessly onesided. There has been terrorist activity, involving online networks, carried out by the Sri Lankan military as well as the LTTE; this fuller picture of the conflict should have been mapped out.

Gabriel Weimann's chapter on virtual terrorism contains an arbitrary list of terrorist groups (p. 192). The problem here is that the groups listed, although they employ violence, have disparate origins, ideologies and objectives. Students of Sh'ite and Sunni Islam will be surprised to discover Al Qaeda and the Lebanese Hizbollah lumped into the same category.

James Lewis's chapter on cyber-conflict within cyberspace neglects to mention the well documented cyber-disruptions associated with the US invasion of Iraq.

The fourth section considers how internet infrastructures as such, are co-ordinated, operated and maintained. Paul Wilson reviews the history of internet coordination and administration. Geoff Huston provides two chapters which detail the national and global regulatory issues associated with internet governance.

Although not critical in the normative sense this section contains valuable historical discussion of a medium which continually reinvents itself within emergent structures of use. Section four covers matters to do with internet policy and regulation.

Ang Peng Hwa's chapter outlines the commercial, societal and governmental modes of internet regulation available to nation states. Peter Yu looks at digital piracy and related matters of intellectual copyright in cyberspace. Venkat Iyer discusses the problem of territorially based jurisdiction over a medium which enhances borderless communication. The preceding chapters are broadly informative without being comprehensive.

None of the authors address the role of transnational corporations in shaping internet policy. Music and publishing, for example, are major industries with vested interests in the debates surrounding copyright and piracy (globally and in the Asia-Pacific region).

Apart from the section on cyber-security and terrorism, this is a useful text for undergraduate students in media and/or internet studies courses. The more advanced reader will prefer more specialised writings on this subject area. Those wanting a critical understanding of internet-related issues will prefer the first section over others.