

# The making of Southeast Asian silicon valleys

Although many parts of Southeast Asia lag behind in terms of Internet penetration, recent years have witnessed an explosion of Internet use across the region, largely supported by the increasing accessibility of mobile technologies, growing digital literacy and the popularity of social media. As the information and communication technologies (ICTs) become more pervasive across the region, there are more and more young people who see their lives inextricably tied to technologies<sup>1</sup> not only as users, but also as creators. Software developers and hardware engineers, hackers, new media specialists or technology enthusiasts in general, who refer to themselves and each other as geeks,<sup>2</sup> are not only to be found in Silicon Valley. Young men (and to a lesser extent, young women) in Singapore, Bandung, Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere, also try to take part in and benefit from the so-called digital revolution, by exchanging knowledge, collaborating and celebrating the geek culture or 'geekdom'.

Zane Kripe



THE FORMATION OF SUCH GROUPS OF PEOPLE should not come as a surprise in countries that have, during the last few decades, discursively and politically positioned the ICTs as the basis for prosperous development and deeper integration into global markets. However, the question now is how the geeks, upon which the realization of such development largely relies, see themselves? Do they align with the discourse pursued by the states or do they draw their understandings about what it means to be a geek in the 21st century from elsewhere?

This article is based on ongoing research, part of a wider project at Leiden University, for which various ideas and perceptions about the future, in relation to technology and the so-called digital revolution, are explored.<sup>3</sup> As the research is in its infancy, it cannot yet provide any nuanced or elaborate arguments; instead what I attempt to offer with this article is a peek into the early explorations of the field in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, which seek answers to questions such as what it means to be a geek in Southeast Asia. What are the aspirations of geeks, and how do they act upon them on a daily basis?

The notion of the English word 'geek' developed in meaning over the course of many years and only in the 1980s did it start being linked to people with a great passion for computer technologies (Blu Buhs, 2010). The image of computer geek in the Western hemisphere has until recently been largely negative, connoting a person who is intelligent, yet socially awkward, with an 'uncool' or 'different' dress sense, and often with poor hygiene. However, since the late 1990s certain shifts have occurred, eventually transforming the perceived image of a geek into a more positive and even desirable one. As the ICTs play an increasingly more important role in the everyday lives of a growing number of people, the importance of geek knowledge and skills increases and so too does their economic and political power (Kelty, 2008). For example, well known geeks such as Bill Gates (Microsoft), Steve Jobs (Apple),

Larry Ellison (Oracle), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Google's Larry Page and Sergey Brin, not only list amongst the richest people in the world, but also amongst the most powerful, according to Forbes magazine.<sup>4</sup> They now stand alongside the heads of state and religious leaders of the world. In mass media, increasing attention is also given to various issues of geek lifestyle, culminating in something known as 'geek chic' – a style of dress that includes T-shirts printed with insider jokes<sup>5</sup> or images of science fiction characters, horn-rimmed glasses, shoulder-strap messenger bags, Converse trainers, an array of electronic gadgets, etc. As Feineman declared in 2005: "There's never been a better time to be a geek." Although such images of geek appeal go global through mass media, they largely stem from the USA and do not necessarily represent the reality elsewhere. Is 'geek' also the new cool in South East Asia?

#### When geeks come together

The last five years or so have been filled with a growing number of geek activities in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Online platforms for the discussion of geek communities and entrepreneurship cover national, regional and international issues; events that bring together hundreds and thousands of geeks have been happening with increasing regularity, and even permanent collaborative spaces have been effectively established by geeks themselves, with no large company or governmental financial support. Geeks are a relatively mobile and very connected part of society; they are informed about successful activities elsewhere and often try to repeat them in their own contexts. In this way, they create new spaces for coming together - both virtually and physically. It is not rare that such spaces transcend the local boundaries and establish connections across borders within and outside the region. Intensifying communications and socialization are both a reason and stimulus for further development of such communities, in which shared problems surrounding 'being a geek' are addressed and more, or less, ambitious future aspirations expressed.

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There are many questions regarding the genesis and development of geek practices in the region and what such developments indicate in relation to globalization, knowledge economy and the state; yet for now I will take a brief look at three particular media that appear to be instrumental in strengthening and celebrating geek culture in the region.

#### BarCamp

In 2005 a unique form of social collaboration, designed to boost creativity after the burst of the Internet bubble, emerged in Silicon Valley; known as BarCamp unconference,<sup>6</sup> it rapidly gained popularity throughout the internet-savvy world. The one or two day event is referred to as an 'unconference' to stress the lack of central authority – there are no invitations or registration fees and, most importantly, the agenda is set by the participants themselves as they arrive at the event. Everyone is a potential speaker, panelist, moderator and organizer, and topics discussed reflect the vast array of interests – ranging from very technical programming aspects, to discussing dating strategies.

BarCamps reached Southeast Asia in 2007; starting off in Singapore, the idea quickly spread to neighboring countries (under the same or different names) bringing together mainly young males aged between 20 and 35. Most of them come from a rather well-off background and have studied or traveled abroad. Usually they share a deep passion for technology and their technological knowledge and skills are their source of income. The main initiators behind BarCamps, or similar meetings in the region, are in most cases geek entrepreneurs, who either work as freelancers or have their own software or web companies. It is not rare for one's organizing efforts to be compensated by the creation of new contacts, increased visibility and the authority gained through the process.

During the meetings knowledge and ideas are shared, new friendships established and many who only knew each other

Above: Opening of BarCamp Yangon Myanmar 2011 that gathered 4000 participants.

Below: Hackerspace Singapore.



## The perspective of the geeks

from online environments finally have the chance to meet face to face. The novelty of such meetings, combined with the bonding processes throughout the meetings, contributes to the high levels of excitement (see also Coleman, 2010) that are openly shared through social media platforms before, during and after the actual events. It is for good reason that Malaysian BarCamps are described as “One big tech *kenduri*”,<sup>7</sup> and that for the second year in a row the BarCamp in Yangon, Myanmar has been the world’s largest gathering of this kind with 4000 participants.<sup>8</sup>

Discovering and interacting with a group of likeminded geeks often inspires and encourages individuals to present at a following meeting, or to pursue a project idea that had been abandoned. It was in fact during the BarCamps in Singapore and Malaysia that the idea about more permanent collaborative spaces for geeks found fertile ground, and less than two years ago the first Singaporean HackerSpace was established, as well as two in Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru).

### HackerSpaces

If BarCamps are creative and nearly ad-hoc gatherings, taking place within a limited time frame, then HackerSpaces are permanent establishments with a physical location where geeks can come together, work on their software or hardware projects and learn from each other.<sup>9</sup> HackerSpaces are community-run and self-sustained; they eschew financial support from governments or companies. The origins of HackerSpaces can be found in the aftermath of the hippy-counter culture movement in the USA<sup>10</sup> – they provide an alternative creative space, separated from state and market. To date there are approximately 500 active HackerSpaces around the world,<sup>11</sup> and it is important to note that, in comparison to other forms of geek gatherings, sustaining a HackerSpace requires substantial dedication and effort, and thus can be considered to indicate the existence of a more developed and substantial geek community.

HackerSpaces appear to be gaining momentum in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, where within one year four new establishments have arisen: Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Medan. One is also in the planning for Jakarta. Interestingly, the HackerSpace in Bandung was created after a group of Bandung geeks, gathering under the name FOWAB,<sup>12</sup> visited the Singaporean HackerSpace and were inspired by the venue, activities and great vibes. It is no surprise that the Bandung HackerSpace has, in turn, inspired other geeks in Indonesia to gather the resources, both human and financial, to establish their own places. Excitement levels are high and it is not rare to hear geeks from these countries discussing what steps are necessary to make their particular locality the ‘Silicon Valley’ of the region.

### Online platforms

Much of geek communication and learning happens through various online forums, discussion groups and news platforms. These are the virtual spaces where geeks find each other and all relevant information on upcoming events. Online news platforms, such as dailysocial.net (Indonesia), sgentrepreneurs.sg, e27.sg (Singapore) or entrepreneurs.my (Malaysia), not only promote local geek activities, but also strengthen the connections between the geeks in various locations and are often the organizers of various geek events, such as BarCamps. Online platforms actually often act as network brokers on local, regional and international levels; they are normally the ones contacted when someone of importance visits, let’s say from Silicon Valley, and wishes to explore the local geek communities. Furthermore, the four platforms mentioned above cooperate extensively with each other and effectively strengthen ties amongst geeks in the region.

### Various sentiments

Meanwhile, being a geek in Southeast Asia doesn’t mean only hanging out with likeminded people at various places and events or reading online news and networking in addition to hours of programming or coding. It also entails frustration and struggle. Much about learning ‘how to be a geek’ comes from the West – either as a result of following news from the Western mass media, traveling, studying abroad and/or interacting with expat geeks (they form a rather large and active proportion of geek communities, especially in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore). This often creates tension. For example, one geek entrepreneur in Malaysia complained: “I am banana: yellow outside, white inside... I don’t belong here”. He was referring to how his understanding about how things should be are ‘Westernized’ and not in line with local circumstances. The tension works both ways. Geeks in Yogyakarta, for example, share the sentiment that Indonesian geeks are not deemed capable of more than being outsourced.

In many cases being a geek or self-employed geek is a status of dubious nature – not entirely accepted by parents, not well respected by peers outside the geek community and, as in

the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, poorly regulated within legislation with regards to Internet Commerce. Infrastructure issues are more of a problem in Indonesia and Malaysia, but Singaporean geek entrepreneurs worry about their small market, with only 5 million inhabitants.

The frustration geeks have with the various incompatibilities between governments’ claimed goals and the actual implemented policies are often part of the geek discussion. While geeks in Malaysia and Indonesia often look upon Singapore as the local, more attainable version of Silicon Valley, geeks in Singapore often joke that Singapore is too perfect and controlled to actually have ‘space’ for the next big thing: creative innovation that could shake the technological universe. Cultural explanations are sought to explain success or the lack of it. An excessive focus on prestige and success, risk aversion and unwillingness to share new ideas and collaborate, is often mentioned as the reason why Singaporean cultural environment is not well fitted for entrepreneurship.

I wish to conclude by mentioning two slogans under which the Singapore HackerSpace operates and which, to my mind, indicate the multifaceted reality of what it means to be a geek in Singapore. The first slogan, “The Zouk of Geekdom”, refers to the popular nightlife venue, and thus considers the HackerSpace as the place to celebrate ‘geekdom’ with likeminded people. The second slogan, “Kiasu free zone”, indicates the geeks’ desire to distance themselves from certain parts of the cultural environment, which they consider to be overly ambitious, greedy and selfish (*kiasu*).

During the next four years I will be exploring these and other media and practices of geeks in the region – to gain insights in the ways geeks think about and act upon their futures. They are neither activists nor policy makers, yet geeks have a special role to play in the announced comings of the digital revolution.

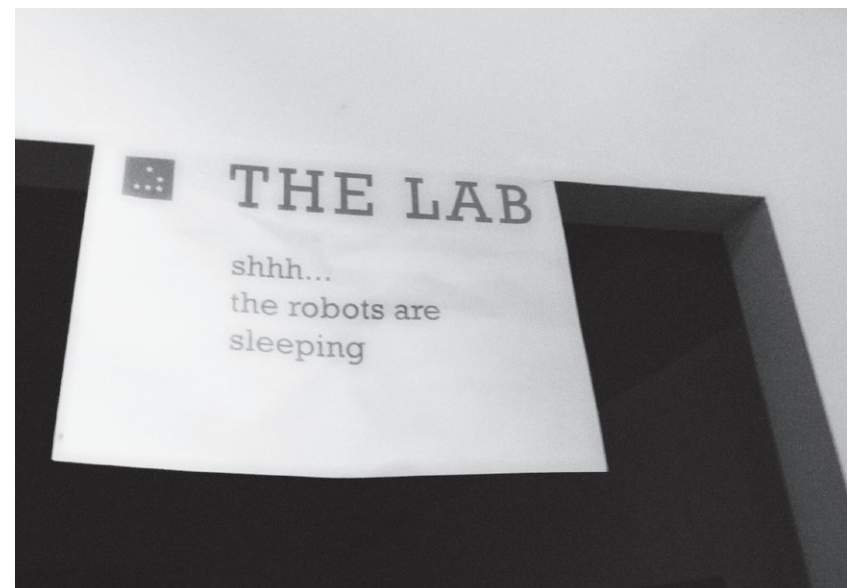
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### Resources

- Blu Buhs, J. 2010. “Wildmen on the Cyberfrontier: The Computer Geek as an Iteration in the American Wildman Lore Cycle”, *Folklore*, 121(1): 61-80.
- Coleman, G. 2010. “The Hacker Conference: A Ritual Condensation and Celebration of a Lifeworld”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 83(1): 47-72.
- Feineman, N. 2005. *Geek Chic: The Ultimate Guide to Geek Culture*. Ginko Press.
- Kelty, C. 2008. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Duke University Press.

### Notes

- In this article ‘technology’ refers to hardware, software and the combinations of both.
- This label is used, in literature and practice, interchangeably with words such as nerds, hackers, developers, coders, etc. Each has a slightly different connotation. In this article I chose to use the word ‘geek’ as an umbrella term; it is also the term most often used when referring to the raising popularity of geek culture – it tends to describe a person with entrepreneur characteristics, rather than just a technical tinkerer.
- In September 2010, the research project “The Future is Elsewhere: Towards a Comparative History of the Futurities of the Digital (R)evolution”, commenced at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University. This research is funded by NWO.
- Forbes 2011 List of The World’s Billionaires <http://www.forbes.com/wealth/billionaires> and 2010 World’s Most Powerful People <http://www.forbes.com/wealth/powerful-people>
- Tocci, J. 2007. “The Well-Dressed Geek: Media Appropriation and Subcultural Style”. Paper presented at MIT5, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (29 April 2007). <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit5/papers/Tocci.pdf>.
- As in ‘Bar’ and ‘Camp’, for more information see [www.barcamps.org](http://www.barcamps.org).
- Kenduri* is a Malay term meaning a religious ceremony, celebration and feast.
- Mong Palatino: “Myanmar: Barcamp Yangon 2011” in *Global Voices*, February 24, 2011: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/24/myanmar-barcamp-yangon-2011/>
- For more information see [www.HackerSpaces.org](http://www.HackerSpaces.org)
- An interesting critical essay about the ideological underpinnings of HackerSpaces, “Hacking the Spaces”, written by Johannes Grenzfuhrner & Frank Apunkt Schneider, can be found here: <http://www.monochrom.at/hacking-the-spaces/>
- See the list of active HackerSpaces around the world: [www.hackerspaces.org](http://www.hackerspaces.org)
- Forum Web Anak Bandung – FOWAB is a group of web technology specialists who organize regular meetings, in many aspects resembling BarCamps in Bandung.



Hackerspace Singapore.



BarCamp Yangon 2011 Second day – the slots for giving presentations are filled up.



Various stickers on laptops are often part of the geek image.



WordCamp meeting in Bandung Indonesia.

All photography courtesy of Zane Kripe.