An Asianist's eye on the digital

Jacqueline Hicks

The deeper the internet infiltrates our daily lives, the more interesting it becomes to study. With universities now introducing courses in Internet Studies and Digital Culture, they are effectively defining a new digital 'place' that requires a unique set of skills and knowledge to understand it. But if the online environment really is a new place, where does that leave area studies specialists interested in the digital? Does it make our region-specific knowledge redundant? Or is it precisely the careful attention to power and place which defines area studies scholarship that this growing field needs?

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ASIAN STUDIES AND THE DIGITAL are in some ways strange bedfellows. While the internet is sometimes described as a 'new internet world', with its own global culture,[1] Asianists trade in references to local and specific cultures. But, as recent research has shown, there is much promise in an approach that looks at the interaction of these two 'worlds'. Investigating the way the internet is assimilated and understood in different parts of the world, Miller and Slater, for example, argue that it is best seen as embedded in other social spaces, rather than situated in a "self-enclosed cyberian apartness."[2] With figures showing that Asians already dominate in terms of worldwide internet users (Fig. 1), and with much more room to grow given the current penetration rate of just 40%, those who study the digital in this region should have plenty to occupy them in the coming years.

Political and economic disruption
What internet-related topics may be relevant for Asianists? The most prominent research has so far been about online political discourse. Calculating the level of Chinese government censorship of blogs, highlighting the role of twitter in spreading political protests in Thailand, and the use of social media by up and coming political figures in Indonesia, exemplify this type of research.

While these topics continue to offer rich insight into the political dynamics of Asian countries, they are increasingly joined by others with equally interesting social and political implications. Worldwide, some of the most popular internet platforms are lauded as 'digital disruptors', connecting people in ways that both undermine whole sectors of the economy and create completely new ones.

In addition to China's massive e-commerce site, *Alibaba*, there are other huge successes around Asia. Indonesia's motorcycle ride-hailing app, *Go-Jek*, already has 200,000 drivers on its books just one year after its launch. But such rapid growth also has the potential to stoke social tensions in the country's informal economic ecologies.

These same platform technologies are also key to changes in the global marketplace for labour. 'Crowd-work' labour platforms, such as *Amazon Mechanical Turk* and *ClickWorker*, mediate the buying and selling of labour for very small tasks like matching images and product descriptions on commercial websites. As Asians find such opportunities to transcend their local labour markets, the implications for workers' rights as well as Asian states are as yet poorly understood. Do such platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for workers in different parts of the world? Or do they represent a continuation of global patterns of exploitation? How do they impact the ability of national states to collect taxes or protect workers' rights? Such questions can only be answered with reference to careful offline context-specific ethnographic research of the type that area studies scholars are trained to perform.

There is also scope for looking at the ways the internet catalyses social change, entrenches power asymmetries or shapes cultural practices in our region. How people construct their religious identities online or what we can learn from the internet about the development of language are all proving fruitful avenues of enquiry. But there is also room for an Asianist eye on a more esoteric field of enquiry that is specific to the online world: information retrieval.

Information politics
As we increasingly turn to the internet to understand the world, we rely more on the computational techniques that sift, summarise and otherwise prioritise the information we seek. If we introduce a concern with the diversity of voices that are found using these techniques, information retrieval techniques become political.

As an Asianist who has worked for the past few years on a 'digital humanities' project, I have frequently attended some highly technical talks. One presented an established web service that automatically summarises news content from across Europe and the world primarily for European Commission officials and policy-makers. It is a great service with a host of useful tools and I often encourage those interested in such techniques to visit and play around. (emm.newsexplorer.eu). Some of the features of this service use a computational

Above: Presentation of 'Good Morning Mr. Orwell' at the Kitchen Gallery, New York, on 8 December 1983. Photograph Copyright Lorenzo Bianda. Reproduced with permission of the Nam June Paik estate.

technique called 'named entity recognition', which automatically extracts names from the news for further analysis. But people's names are messier than you might imagine, and depending on the source can be spelt differently, use different parts of a multi-word name, or the same name can refer to two different people. So, to help resolve some of these ambiguities, this web service excludes names that only use one word.

This makes sense technically, and has no effect in cultures where most people have at least two words in their name. But in Indonesia, parts of South India, and elsewhere around the world, it is common to use just one name (mononym), which means that such people are automatically excluded from the news summaries that the people using this website receive.

The implications of this particular example are small, and there are much more significant barriers to the representation of Indonesian or Indian voices in these news summaries, such as language and source selection. But it illustrates the point that a seemingly innocuous and largely invisible technical decision can have real effects on the diversity of voices that show up in the information we receive. More broadly, it points to a role for the knowledge of non-Western language specialists in the development of computational techniques.

More frequently, the politics of information retrieval concerns the functioning of search engines, and here too there is scope for an area studies perspective. The Oxford Internet Institute, for example, has produced some interesting research on the 'information geographies' of the internet that looks at how different areas of the world are represented in google searches or on Wikipedia (geography.oii.ox.ac.uk).

A concern with the diversity of information available on the internet can also work the other way to consider structural influences on the information received by those living in Asia. Censorship by national governments is one element of this type of research, but as Facebook's *internet.org* is rolled out in Asia, questions are also being asked about the influence of corporations.

With its vision of connecting people in less developed countries to the internet for free, internet.org's *Free Basics* programme offers users of some telecom companies a limited number of websites and apps without charging data fees. Its critics say that it violates the tenets of net neutrality – that no matter where you are in the world, you should be able to access, or provide content on, the internet without discrimination. At the time of writing, this is a serious enough concern to warrant the Indian Telecom Regulatory Authority to temporarily block *Free Basics* in India.

The fear that corporate interests may dictate access to information is compounded by the fact that large numbers of people, particularly in developing countries, believe that Facebook *is* the internet.[3]

An emerging research agenda
As with all technological developments, there is a discourse of novelty surrounding the internet and related digital methods that sometimes sounds like overstatement. Are digital technologies unique enough to warrant a new field of study? In some ways we have seen it all before, and we could say that the internet just represents another change to the medium, like the printing press did before it. But all mediums have their own particular character, affecting our lives and behaviour in very particular ways that need further enquiry to understand.

I have presented here a very small selection of issues for Asianists interested in the digital – ones that particularly reflect my own interests in political and economic power. Until now, the trend has been for this newly developing research agenda to take place in skills-based projects and general internet focused institutes. But this is changing. Books are now being released (*Asian Perspective on Digital Cultures*, 2016), journals established (*Asiascape: Digital Asia*), and even degree programmes set up (*Emerging Digital Cultures in Asia and Africa* at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London), bringing a concern with the digital into area studies departments.

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References
1 Dutta, S., Dutton, W.H. & G. Law. 2011. *The New Internet World. A Global Perspective on Freedom of Expression, Privacy, Trust and Security Online*, Contribution to: The Global Information Technology Report 2010-2011. Transformations 2.0. World Economic Forum, April 2011. (http://tinyurl.com/new-internet-world)
2 Miller, D. & D. Slater. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Oxford and New York: Berg.
3 Mirani, L. 2015. "Millions of Facebook Users Have No Idea They're Using the Internet", *Quartz* (http://tinyurl.com/FBusers-millions).

Asia (48.1%)
Europe (18.1%)
Latin America/Caribbean (10.1%)
Africa (9.8%)
North America (9.4%)
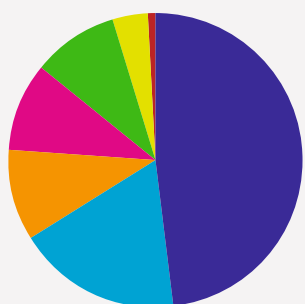**Middle East (3.7%)**
Australia/Oceania (0.8%)

Fig. 1: Internet users in the World by World Regions, 2015
Source: www.internetworldstats.com

"Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles. Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory and Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate. Something interesting is happening."

Tom Goodwin, TechCrunch, 3 March 2015