The deeper the internet infiltrates our daily lives, the more interesting it becomes. Whatever internet technologies on Asian lives, and the use of digital media, in Asia (www.kitlv.nl/digitalasia). With speakers coming from institutes. But this is changing. Books are now being released on the digital into area studies departments.

Political and economic disruptions 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 branded 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 informals 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 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, embraces power asymmetries or shapes cultural practices in our region. How do 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 Asian 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 very technical talks. One presented an established web service that automatically summarises news content from across the internet from small tasks for very low pay. 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.

The implications of this particular example are small, and there are much more significant barriers to the representation of non-Western or local cultures in internet communication 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.

A concern with the diversity of information available on the internet can also work the other way to consider structural influences on the internet mediated 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.1

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 the internet just represents another change to the medium, like the printing press did before it. But all medias have their own particular character, affecting our lives and behaviour in very particular ways that need further enquiry to understand. I have presented just 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 (Asian Digital), 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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AASTUDIES 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,2 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 how 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 cyborgian apartheid’.3 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.

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References