

Information Controls in a Time of Crisis: Case Studies from Southeast Asia

Convener:

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Brief Description:

In a time of crisis, information controls — defined as actions conducted in or through information and communication technologies that seek to deny, disrupt, secure, or monitor information for political ends — may increase in scope, intensity, and depth. Authorities may introduce new types of censorship to prevent certain information from being accessed in the country and service providers may be required to undertake measures to filter or suspend communications. The global nature of the Internet means that multiple (and sometimes external) parties may be involved in the contestation (e.g., neighboring states, civil society groups). In analyzing information controls in a time of crisis, this panel will focus on Vietnam and Thailand and discuss their implications for human rights.

Vietnam has experienced distributed denial of service attacks over a dispute against China involving regions of the South China Sea. The Vietnamese government is also known for imprisoning bloggers and cyber-dissidents. Recently, for instance, blogger Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, who writes under the pen name Mother Mushroom and is a co-founder of the Network of Vietnamese Bloggers, was arrested for criticizing the government's handling of a chemical dump that caused mass fish deaths. Meanwhile in Thailand, the aftermath of the passing of HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej on October 13 has seen an unprecedented information control phenomenon. Alongside widely circulated words of condolences to the loss of the great king in all media outlets, the mourning Thai society also experienced, although not apparent to most, media censorship, invoking of lese majeste law, issuing of content regulations to mass media operators, social media operators, and users, as well as the blocking of websites that are critical of the late king. A number of ultra-loyalists to the throne have taken matters into their hands to witch-hunt online those who disrespect the late king. A growing middle class and increased connectivity in the region mean that the Internet has the potential to positively impact life. The cases of Vietnam and Thailand have shown, however, that challenges toward a free and open Internet remain.

Format: Single session

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