

## BOOK REVIEW

*Global Internet Governance: Influences from Malaysia and Singapore* by Susan Leong and Terence Lee. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 105 pp.

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The issue of internet control, regulation or governance has been exhaustively studied, with near-conclusive findings repetitively drawn from various cases. Discussion on how the internet is governed has statically taken a two-sided framework, namely liberal versus authoritarian. Hence, it is an immense challenge for contemporary scholars to open up a new perspective or academic debate on this subject. The mission to seek a plurality of approaches in understanding the topic will allow researchers to understand complexities and consequences of the media world without taking any politically correct standpoint on this subject with respect to policies of any country or government.

This book has succinctly outlined historical differences of internet governance (IG) in Malaysia and Singapore with an intention to explore its influences and lessons in comparison to the existing model. The volume meticulously constructs the formation and journey of IG paths that intertwined with technological advancement and socio-political development in both countries. It achieves the intention to negotiate and provide a certain level of alternative perspective through experiences of the two neighbouring countries.

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter lays down the framework of the main argument and justification of the Malaysian and Singaporean cases by referring to the debate of IG amongst academicians from around the world and problematising its main paradigm. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the early internet expansion and history of its governance in Malaysia and Singapore, respectively. Chapter 4 investigates the shift of IG amid rapid political changes in Malaysia,

while Chapter 5 illustrates the mindset of the Singapore government by using a concept inspired by Michel Foucault on matters of surveillance and regulation. The last chapter attempts to suggest a so-called hybrid type of IG to contest the binary way of models from larger players, namely the United States of America (USA) and China.

Malaysia and Singapore are countries with a shared political history but have taken different paths in many aspects. In Malaysia, the early implementation of the internet coincided with the political crisis of *reformasi*, when absolute freedom of the internet was utilised for political contestation and mobilisation. The cyber-politics tradition inherited has continued to influence cyberspace and political activism until the political tsunami of 2008. Political scandals and instability have subsequently lingered in Malaysia, the cyber space playing an important role in spreading or even manipulating certain partisan agendas. Malaysia has shifted from a “no censorship of the internet” promise during the early stages of the Multimedia Super Corridor to a phase of regulation between the year 2008 and 2018. The shift is parallel with the global trend of the IG model. The enactment of anti-fake news laws marks the arrival of tightening of internet regulation, but with prevailing uncertainty ensuing from the abrupt change of government in March 2020 and the widespread impression that the current Perikatan Nasional government lacks legitimacy, the anti-fake news laws have been left in abeyance.

Singapore—the “Intelligent Island,” has taken a different footpath since the early development of the internet infrastructure, whereby the state maintained a tight grip on political authority and economic sovereignty. In comparison to Malaysia’s initial cyberlibertarian utopianism, Singapore has harnessed advantages of an advanced internet infrastructure towards fulfilling economic as well as ideological needs of a small multicultural nation-state. Despite the internet’s potential in enhancing its economic productivity, Singapore has insisted on the necessity to adhere to a model of media control. Unlike Malaysia which tapped into the libertarian nature of the internet, Singapore has strategically “treated the Internet as an economic infrastructure from its very inception” (p. 38) and its IG strategy has systematically engrained social, cultural and political control at various points. Hence, the libertarian internet can be tamed for economic ambitions.

The compilation and analysis of the past IG in Malaysia and Singapore in the book are important for future research. The volume outlines major milestones of IG and related technological developments in both countries. The social and political history of internet developments assembled in the book are

thorough and impressive. This is the major strength of the book. Furthermore, a comparative perspective on Malaysia and Singapore has enlightened readers on the two different trajectories of IG.

In terms of limitation, the book relies on secondary data to construct its main argument. IG models from Malaysia and Singapore are traced through meticulous policy formulation documents, political speeches of politicians and news reports supplemented with interpretation of related major societal and political changes. If a grounded research method such as an in-depth interview were also conducted by talking to relevant interlocutors, Chapter 5 about Singapore might have yielded an alternative understanding besides the Foucauldian discourse on surveillance and governmentality. As for Malaysia, primary data can strengthen the debate of anti-fake news law by considering also the policy maker's perspective. That Malaysia started with the adoption of a cyberlibertarian view was not a naïve decision then; lack of IT expertise and the divide among political elites having some bearing on the decision. Since *reformasi*, authoritarianism has been on the decline, thanks in part to the libertarian IG regime. Another sore point of the book is the lack of ethnographic primary data. The authors achieve the purpose of what they had set out to do, even with an over-reliance on secondary data.

The book has contributed to the current academic debate on the IG model by providing an alternative understanding from Malaysia and Singapore in contrast to main Western-centric models. Malaysia's original IG model, starting from the liberal discourse and characterised by subsequent regulation, is not unknown in other developing countries. Yet, no research book has been dedicated to comprehensively studying the model. Singapore's IG model is more unique, successfully balancing between economic gain and political control. Leong and Lee's book offers a hybrid model of IG in contrast to the dominant binary understanding framework.

This publication will become a significant reference for researchers on IG studies specifically and media studies in general. Besides becoming a reference for scholars and students in media studies, the book will be of great benefit to policy makers involved in formulating internet regulation strategies. It will potentially be an important textbook for internet regulation, apart from being a useful source for Malaysian and Singaporean studies with its rich analysis of the contemporary political vicissitudes of both countries' visionary technological ambitions and dreams. In addition, journalists and IT readers will find many themes touched in the book handy as they probe further into issues of media independence and freedom of speech.