

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

By Associate Professor Emma Baulch

In 2024, SEADS was awarded three years of funding under Monash University's Future Centres scheme to pursue a mission of bringing an academic voice to public debate about the social and political implications of digital technologies' uptake in Southeast Asia. In 2025, we've made a lot of progress toward this goal, with a strong focus on public engagement.

SEADS launched in February at a high profile event focused on online safety for young Malaysians, featuring YB Hannah Yeoh, (former) Minister for Youth and Sport. In September, SEADS convened panels at the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation's KL Smart Cities Expo that explored models and indicators for successful smart cities. We also convened monthly panels on topics ranging from social media and politics, digital technologies and activism, feminist technologies, and disability and digital technologies.



Academics have a distinctive role in public debates about digital technology's social and political implications. At SEADS, peer-reviewed publication is central to this work. Peer review subjects our analyses to rigorous scrutiny, connecting our research on digital technology to broader social and political developments and to longer histories of technological change. This scholarly approach—marked by both breadth and depth—strengthens public debate and provides crucial foundations for well-informed policy making. In 2025, SEADS' research has been focussed on three important policy areas: AI Governance and Regulation, Online Safety and Harm, and Digital Economies and Inclusion.

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AI Governance and Regulation

AI Governance and Regulation in Southeast Asia is a highly complex and multi-layered policy area that cries out for scholarly analysis. Governments default to grand announcements belying their faith in AI's capacity to improve efficiency (as a tool for public administration), or drive new investment (in data centres). In October, Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim announced plans to develop a sovereign AI cloud. These visions often skim over the intense geopolitical contests that are entangled with AI uptake, resulting from a range of factors, including dependence on US-made semiconductors, the complicity of US big tech firms in funding the Israeli Defence Force, and the large stake of Chinese tech firms in Southeast Asian digital economies. SEADS will be exploring these thorny issues in January 2026 in an academic workshop and public event to critically examine how the notion of 'sovereign' AI can be understood in context of contemporary geopolitics in the region.



The sudden mass availability of generative AI has left educational, news industry and public organisations scrambling to develop both proficient and critical use of AI among their workforces. At the time of writing, SEADS' Emma Baulch and Premesh Chandran are wrapping up a Google-funded research consultancy that studies AI-related skills gaps in the Malaysian and Singaporean news industries. We found the most striking skill gaps occur among mid-career journalists and newsroom leaders. Newsroom leaders are not proficient in AI tools, leading to their inability to strategise investment in AI and lead the development of AI policies for their news organisations. In the wake of this research, SEADS will be launching our inaugural Executive Education offering in 2026 - AI and Policy.

In addition, SEADS has won funds to study the use of AI in public administration and the judiciary in Malaysia. Led by Dr Stefan Bächtold, the research studies the debates surrounding the piloting of AI for court sentencing, and its use in traffic regulation, to develop concrete and actionable alternatives.

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Online Safety and Harm

In policy-making around online safety and harm, the notion of children as a high risk group often assumes centre stage. When heinous acts of violence are perpetrated among or upon children, such as the fatal stabbing of a schoolgirl by her classmate in Malaysia recently, there is often a rush to blame social media and to assume that measures like age-based banning will be efficacious. In 2025, Indonesia introduced age-based restrictions of social media and in 2026 Malaysia is set to do the same. While some have pointed out the harms to children that may result from them being banned from social media, SEADS researcher Dr Dyah Pitaloka has been studying the bigger picture of harm and safety on virtual reality platforms. Funded by Meta, her research considers not only how users of such platforms experience harm, but also the value they derive from engaging with the platforms. Based on the results of her research, Dyah is working with tech developers to design virtual reality environments that are safe and inclusive for at-risk groups.

Digital Economies and Inclusion

The digitisation of the economy in Southeast Asia has seen an increasing proportion of the population engaged in platform trade as sellers, buyers and workers. Governments champion this shift, touted for its potential to absorb excess labour, or provide a vital uplift for lower socio-economic groups. At the multilateral level, the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement seeks standardisation of logistics, banking, identity verification and data protection to enable seamless trade across the region. SEADS' Emma Baulch is an investigator in an Australia Research Council-funded project, Digital Transaction Platforms in Asia. The research has found that, for workers and traders, far from seamless, engagement with digital platforms often involves extraction, exploitation and exclusion. Emma's research compares and contrasts Malaysian traders who have and have not transitioned to online trade, to understand the social and cultural factors contributing to developing a successful online business. She argues, a rigorous measure of digital inclusion and exclusion at national scale in Malaysia is sorely needed to support the successful roll out of digital economy policies.

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The Year Ahead

SEADS will continue to roll out monthly public events and our monthly newsletter in 2026. In November 2025, we launched a fourth SEADS program, [Digital Methods in Southeast Asia](#), led by Monash University Indonesia Arran Ridley (see below for Arran's report on the workshop that took place at Monash Indonesia in early December). In April, we will be convening a second Digital Methods in Southeast Asia workshop in KL. Sincere thanks are due to the very able administrative team at SEADS, especially Project Manager Sheril A. Bustaman and also Preveena Devi, who has been interning with us for a year and just committed to another year at SEADS. Thanks also to all of our readers for continuing to engage and support us.

Feedback on SEADS' Past Events

We're opening the floor to you!

If you've attended any SEADS events in the past year, we'd love to hear your thoughts. What did you enjoy most? What could we do better? Your feedback helps us shape more meaningful, inclusive, and thought-provoking sessions in the future.

Share your reflections [here!](#)

● Get In Touch With Us

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IN FOCUS:

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EVENTS IN THE LAST QUARTER



Feminist & Gender-Inclusive Approaches to Technology

On 9 October 2025, SEADS hosted Feminist & Gender-Inclusive Approaches to Technology: Art, AI & Activism at Monash University Malaysia. The event brought together Malaysian and Indonesian artists, technologists, and activists to explore how digital innovation and artificial intelligence can be reimagined through feminist, intersectional, and inclusive lenses.

The discussion opened with reflections on how feminist tech practices challenge both digital exclusion and data exploitation while centring creativity, pleasure, and care.

● Key Takeaways

- Feminist approaches to technology prioritise safety, consent, and inclusion alongside innovation.
- Joy, art, and creativity can coexist with activism, offering counter-narratives to online hatred.
- Intersectional, region-specific frameworks are essential to address Southeast Asia's digital realities.
- Collaboration between academia, activism, and design is vital for ethical, gender-inclusive AI futures.

Reframing Digital Methods for Southeast Asia: A Monash Cross-Campus Initiative

By Dr Arran Ridley

Digital research methods developed primarily in Western contexts often require significant adaptation when applied to Southeast Asia. From platform ecosystems that operate differently, to diverse linguistic landscapes, to distinct regulatory environments, researchers in the region face unique methodological challenges. The Reframing Digital Methods for Southeast Asia workshop series addresses these challenges by bringing together researchers to critically reflect on, adapt, and develop methods responsive to the regions' specificities.

In early December, Emma Baulch and Stefan Bächtold headed to Monash University Indonesia's BSD campus, joining Arran Ridley and Dyah Pitaloka for the first of two workshop events as part of an Arts Campus Mobility Grant. The program brought together approximately 25 academic staff, HDR students, and postgraduate researchers from across Monash's Southeast Asian campuses to explore platform economies, algorithmic governance, misinformation, and digital labour.

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The workshops aimed to support grant applications, align with planned SEADS (Southeast Asia Digital Studies) PhD student recruitment in 2026, and strengthen collaborative research capacity across Monash's Southeast Asia network.

Day One: Methods and Creative Responses

The 'Methods Mash-up Workshop' opened day one with participants working in small groups to reflect on four research methods: social media scraping, visual and multimodal methods, co-design and participatory approaches, and algorithmic auditing/AI critique.

Social Media Scraping discussions highlighted tensions around API access, consent, buzzer accounts, and public versus private content. Gaps included language and context challenges, hidden like counts, platform generalisation, and government intervention. Desires included cross-platform scraping ability, contextual translation, and Indonesia-specific protocols for sentiment analysis.

Visual Methods explored gaps between researchers and participants regarding goals and impact, and tensions around consent, data privacy, researcher bias, and power asymmetries. Desires emphasised challenging mainstream narratives and creating compelling synthesis of diverse voices.

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Co-design centered on power relations and resource inequalities between Global North and South, language barriers, and data infrastructure accessibility. Desires included collective co-design processes, inter-generational participation, creating a handbook for co-design in Southeast Asia, and sustaining local champion involvement.

Algorithmic Auditing/AI Critique revealed tensions around opacity and 'free' registration that commodifies data. Gaps included inequality, bias, and local algorithm-gaming practices. Desires emphasised expanding user agency, combining auditing with platform ethnography, and developing multi-stakeholder regulation.

The 'Zine-making Workshop' built on these reflections, with participants creating visual responses that made visible assumptions and power relations often obscured in traditional academic writing.



Day Two: Unconference and Datawalking

The 'Unconference' session split into two participant-led groups:

Queering Public Policy explored "queering" as questioning normative boundaries beyond LGBTIQ-specific contexts. Participants discussed how public policy—guidelines for surveillance, visibility, and decision-making—often operates opposite to queering by creating rather than questioning boundaries. The group examined how digital policy could provide equal communicative space, treat digital data as justice, address marginalised voices, offer protection against discrimination, and fundamentally solve problems from the perspective of the most oppressed.

Digital Ecosystem Vulnerabilities examined how the digital economy fuels fraud across Southeast Asia, with Indonesia as a "trend setter" and Myanmar as the "factory" for scam operations. Ecosystem factors included low digital literacy creating "easy targets," minimal verification, weak compliance practices, and weak regulatory systems. The discussion noted venture capital's focus on business risk mitigation over broader social effects, and covered data leaks, international comparisons, and gaps between research assumptions and Southeast Asian realities.

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The 'Datawalking Workshop' moved outside to The Breeze, an outdoor mall within the wider complex Monash University, Indonesia is part of. Using zine prompts, participants observed digital infrastructure, surveillance, and labour.

Insights emerged around "dead zones"—smoking and break areas creating unease, where workers were super visible yet unseen from workspaces. Security guards and cameras were ubiquitous, yet people didn't mind surveillance. One guard approached a participant worried they were reporting on him, revealing anxieties about watching while being watched. Participants noted gendered surveillance preferences and "sousveillance"—self-surveillance through reflective surfaces.

The mall's architecture enabled people-watching through open restaurant windows. A divide emerged where Grab riders congregated, questioning Monash's relationship to the mall. Invisible queues at Boost Juice showed how online orders displaced in-person customers, making platform labour's impact tangible.

Future Directions

The 'Collaborative Roadmapping' session formalised four new SEADS research programs: Digital Economies (platform labour, e-commerce, fintech), Governing Technologies (digital governance, smart cities, e-government), Technology and Safety (online harms, content moderation, digital fraud), and Digital Methods in Southeast Asia (developing responsive methodologies).

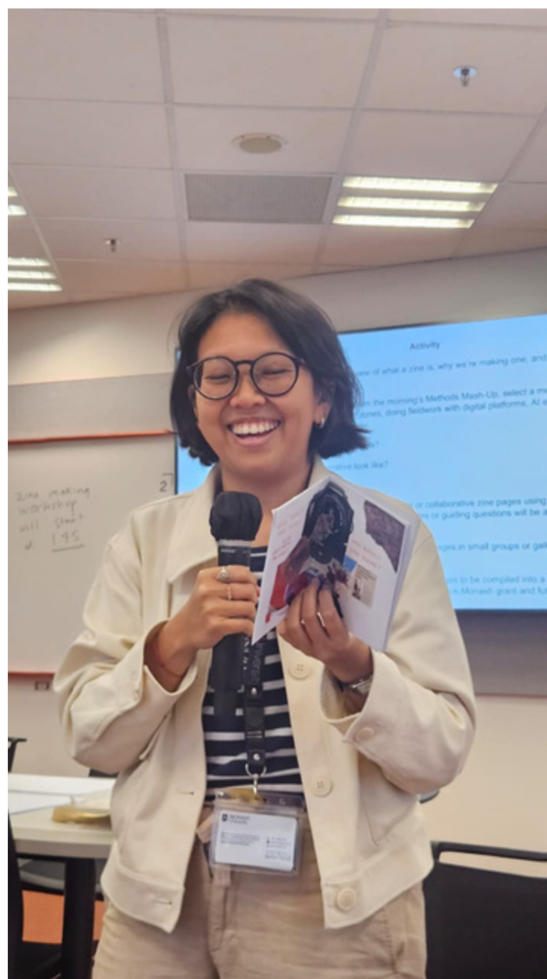
Next steps include, specific to Digital Methods in Southeast Asia: Warwick-Monash Alliance grant submission for March 2026, larger funding proposal development by late-2026, creating a digital repository for methods and resources, and establishing a working paper series or handbook.



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A second workshop series will take place at Monash University Malaysia in the first half of 2026.

For updates,
please contact
sheril.bustaman@monash.edu.



This workshop series was made possible through an Arts Campus Mobility Grant from Monash University.

Addressing Media Illiteracy in the Age of AI

By Dr. Benjamin Loh and Munira Mustaffa

As Malaysians navigate a digital world increasingly flooded with misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithm-driven content, the question remains: how do we build resilience against media and information illiteracy in the age of AI?

On BFM 89.9's The Breakfast Grill, host Elaine Bowie sat down with Munira Mustafa, Executive Director of Chaser Group, and Dr Benjamin Loh, Course Director of the Bachelor of Digital Media and Communications at Monash University Malaysia, to unpack the issue.

"Digital literacy isn't just about being online," Dr Loh explained. "It's the ability to assess whether the information you consume is reputable and reliable; and knowing how to verify it when in doubt."

Munira noted that AI has shifted the landscape of misinformation: "AI-generated content doesn't rely on your attention; it preys on your lack of it. The danger lies in how easily artificial content blends with reality."

Both speakers agreed that AI and algorithms are not neutral. "They reflect the biases of their creators," Dr Loh said, pointing to how content amplification can favour sensationalism and polarisation.



"Ownership and intent behind platforms matter as much as regulation."

To strengthen media literacy, Dr Loh emphasised the need for independent fact-checkers, stronger civil society involvement, and critical thinking education in schools.

Munira added that "policy responses should go hand in hand with digital access and awareness, not restrictions alone."

The conversation underscores a central truth: media literacy in the AI era is not just about avoiding fake news; it's about reclaiming agency in how we interpret, share, and shape information itself.

Listen to the full podcast [here](#).

SEADS will be kicking off the year with two events in January 2026.

Tech Stacks and Stakes - Sovereignty vs dependency

Jointly hosted by SEADS and Yayasan Malysiakini, funded by Luminate.

Date: 22nd January 2026

Time: 5pm to 7pm

**Venue: Plenary Theatre,
Monash University Malaysia**

States are increasingly dependent on technologies that are designed, built, owned and often operated from outside their borders. Social media platforms, online shopping and payments, communication technologies, mobile phones, computer operating systems, business software and AI are deeply integrated deep into everyday life.

Yet, their size and influence dwarf the ability of governments to govern them effectively. Big tech are prone to ignoring local rules when it imposes liabilities or controls over their technologies. More recently, international agreements such as Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) now introduce clauses around digital services, creating exemptions and going as far as requiring a country to 'consult' when developing digital service agreements with other nations.

How should governments navigate the stakes around tech stacks? How do we define Sovereignty vs dependency in the tech age, more so with the growth of AI into our classrooms, offices and homes.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS SEADS Future Events



Google Talent Gap Research Survey - Report Launch

Tentative date: 26th January 2026

SEADS will be launching the report of the findings from the Google Talent Gap Research Survey done in 2025, together with Rubin Khoo, Meera Sivasoathy, Dr Benjamin Loh and AWATAR.

The event will feature a short presentation of the findings, followed by a panel discussion with the researchers and other relevant stakeholders.

Invitations to both events will be sent out to all SEADS newsletter subscribers, but if you'd like to express your interest in attending beforehand, please email sheril.bustaman@monash.edu