

IN FOCUS:

SEADS FEATURE



Social Media & Politics in Southeast Asia with Merlyna Lim

The growing influence of digital platforms in shaping political narratives, controlling public discourse, and reinforcing systemic inequalities demands deeper examination.

This in-person panel, organised by SEADS in collaboration with the University of Nottingham, explored how algorithmic design, censorship, and digital manipulation are reshaping democratic spaces across Southeast Asia.

We were honoured to have Merlyna Lim, author of *Social Media and Politics in Southeast Asia*, alongside Siti Nurliza (Sinar Project), Nalini Elumalai (ARTICLE 19), and Dr Stefan Bächtold (SEADS), with Gayathry Venkiteswaran (University of Nottingham) moderating a vibrant and deeply insightful session.

● Key Takeaways

- Social media algorithms can whitewash political campaigns, prioritising visibility over integrity.
- Online censorship continues to suppress dissent and marginalise critical voices.
- Digital surveillance and manipulation are increasingly being normalised under the guise of national security and public order.



Tech in Activism with Rumah Mandiri

SEADS in collaboration with MANDIRI is proud to host Tech in Activism: platform, advocacy & collective action in Malaysia.

The panel discussion will look into the evolution of platforms' roles in advocacy and affecting collective action in Malaysia, featuring panelists Danny Lim (author of *We Are Marching Now: Bersih 1.0*), Tharma Pillai (co-founder of UNDI18), Ain Husniza (founder of Pocket Of Pink), and Dr Dyah Pitaloka (SEADS).

The session will be moderated by Dobby Chew of MANDIRI.

You're Invited!
SEADS Future Event

MONASH University

Register via QR code:

TECH IN ACTIVISM

Platforms, advocacy and collective action in Malaysia

Moderated by:
DOBBY CHEW CHUAN YANG
MANDIRI

9 MAY 2025 | 7PM TO 10PM
RUMAH MANDIRI, PJ
(Dinner will be provided)

In collaboration with:

DANNY LIM
Journalist & Author

AIN HUSNIZA
Pocket of Pink

THARMA PILLAI
UNDI18

DIYAH PITALOKA
SEADS

MANDIRI

Date: 9th May 2025

Time: 7pm to 10pm

Venue: Rumah Mandiri, PJ

Entrance is free by registration
& dinner will be provided.

[Register for the event here!](#)



Rumah MANDIRI is the central hub of MANDIRI's operations, serving as a vibrant space for youth empowerment, collaboration, and leadership development. Located in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, it hosts forums, discussions, training sessions, and community-building activities aimed at fostering positive change. The space is open to all individuals seeking to engage in initiatives that promote democratic participation, social justice, and progressive ideas in Malaysia.

Abusing collective digital actions against minorities online in Malaysia

By Benjamin YH Loh

In March 2025, news broke of an old Hindu temple in the heart of Kuala Lumpur that was to be relocated to make way for the development of a new mosque. The issue became controversial as proponents of the temple argued that the temple had been at the location for over 130 years, well before Malaysia achieved its independence and so why was it forced to be moved? The murky details that followed indicate that the land was sold to private developers who are now evicting the temple from their property. This then brought the ire of the Malay majority who accused the temple of being “illegal” for occupying land that did not belong to them.

This rhetoric of illegal Hindu temples has been a perennial issue faced by the local Indian community: they are perceived by other locals to indiscriminately erect temples on other people’s lands. In reality, many of these temples existed during colonial times, but during the switch to Malaysia, many were unable to pay or legally acquire the land they occupied. Thus, many of these temples became “illegal” due to systemic and structural barriers faced by the Indian community.

Sowing SEADS: Words From the Team



Photos by Sheril A. Bustaman

The temple issue was eventually resolved with the new land owners offering them a new plot of land nearby and the temple committee agreeing to relocate, but the resentment amongst Malay ethno-nationalists online continued to grow. These groups plotted to weaponise online platforms against the Malaysian Indian community. Mobilising followers online, these groups made reports and left feedback on the location information for any and all Hindu Temples in Malaysia on Google Maps to indicate that these temples were all illegal. As such, whenever any of these temples were searched or appeared on the app, they would be listed as “illegal temples”.

This type of digital vigilantism, a form of review-bombing, is one of many forms of collective digital actions that make use of large coordinated actions to overwhelm and distort crowdsourced systems. Many platforms that allow for reviews or public feedback like Google Maps often defer to public opinion to make changes and edits to locations, especially if there is a large volume of requests. This allows many such actions to often bypass automated and AI moderation systems (which prioritise high volumes when reacting to reports and feedback).

This form of digital vigilantism was first pioneered by the Gamergate movement, an online movement formed on the basis to restore objectivity to video games journalism, but in reality was a deeply misogynistic male-dominated movement, that organised targeted harassment against women in the video games industry. This movement was the catalyst in the development and mainstreaming of many problematic digital collective actions such as review bombing, swatting and organised doxing (revealing someone's private details online with the intention to cause harm). Gamergate would go on to inspire alt-right and manosphere groups and communities to perpetuate their hate and oppression against minority groups.

Sowing SEADS: Words From the Team



The same techniques have been utilised by local conservative groups, often in controversial situations featuring the infamous “3R” topics of Race, Religion, and Royalty. In these situations where an alleged perpetrator was assumed to be attacking local institutions or stoking racial or religious tensions, then it was considered fair game to openly harass and destroy their lives.

The first attacks take the form of relentless cyberbullying on all their social media, often forcing them to close their accounts or abandon social media entirely. After that, it escalates to include review bombing, their place of work with 1-star reviews, calling their employers to complain about them, or even finding and harassing them in person.

For a long time, many of these actions were difficult to be labelled as crimes since we did not have specific laws that covered Internet related crimes such as doxing and cyberbullying. The Malaysian government recently passed some amendments to the Penal Code that include provisions that address cyberbullying and doxing. While it remains to be seen if these laws would be useful to protect people against angry digital mobs, it is hopefully a first step in stopping this growing menace.

Until then it is important that people refrain from engaging with angry and negative attacks against individuals online as small issues can quickly escalate and lead to many forms of digital vigilantism, with some leading to death. In cases where people's lives are destroyed or reputations ruined, it can be easy to say that you were not responsible just because you left an angry comment or reshared an attack against them, but in this day and age of cyberbullying that is so ever present, we have to be mindful of all our online activities, including simple negative engagement and the potential damage it can cause.



Benjamin YH Loh is a lecturer at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia. He is a media scholar who employs digital ethnography in studying emergent cultures and the digital public sphere. He regularly publishes Op-Eds with Malaysiakini, The Vibes, SCMP and Nikkei Asia Review and shares his thoughts on Twitter (@ThatBenLoh). He was also a former Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute where he has published articles on digital issues within Malaysia.

OPEN CALL: Applications for SEADS PhD Candidates

The Southeast Asia Research Centre for Digital Tech and Society (SEADS) is a research centre based at Monash University Malaysia's School of Arts and Social Sciences, one of the premier humanities and social science research and teaching institutions in Malaysia. SEADS aims to advance scholarship through critically exploring and reconceptualising the relationships between digital technologies and human societies in Southeast Asia, using humanities and social science approaches. Applications are now open for SEADS' two fully-funded PhD positions for 2025.

Research projects that may be related to the following areas:

- E-commerce: including studies that focus on traders, workers, delivery drivers, consumption, the political economy of e-commerce, the history of e-commerce
- Creative economies: streaming platforms and creative work, AI and creative work, gaming platforms
- Digital public sphere: Online activism, online political discourse, Mis/Dis/Malinformation, Digital media literacy, digital regulations and freedom of expression, digital journalism
- Digital technology and political/armed conflict; online hate speech; digital tech in insurgencies
- Governing technologies: uses and resistance to digital technologies in government; population and mobilities management; biometrics & biopolitics; surveillance practices & securitisation
- (Geo)politics and power of digital infrastructures; socio-technical imaginaries and state formation; digital tech and development
- Urban technologies: technology and urban space, smart cities, digital infrastructure, surveillance, glitches and breakdowns
- Technology and gender: Gender discourses within digital platforms, AI and synthetic media, gender-based violence, gender justice and techno-feminism, gender/sex focused misinformation, LGBTQIA+ digital activism.



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- (Geo)politics and power of digital infrastructures; socio-technical imaginaries and state formation; digital tech and development
- Urban technologies: technology and urban space, smart cities, digital infrastructure, surveillance, glitches and breakdowns

Please submit an expression of interest by sending your updated CV and a 2000 word research proposal to sheril.bustaman@monash.edu by 30 June 2025.

The proposal should include:

- Project title
- Research topic summary (three or four sentences that encapsulate the project)
- Project description (describe the proposed project including relevant theoretical contexts)
- Rationale for project (what motivated your interest in this particular area?)
- Main research questions (list 3-4 questions that underpin your investigation or research topic)
- Methodology (describe your proposed research methods, eg ethnography, textual analysis, interviewing etc)
- Outcomes of this research and its contribution to knowledge (how is your research filling gaps in the field and revising existing understandings, or contributing to key debates?)
- Bibliography

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Censored by the Algorithm: Whose Voices Get Erased?

By Preevena Devi

Imagine posting about injustice, only to be flagged, while actual hate speech slips through untouched.

Automated moderation systems powered by AI are meant to keep us safe. But what happens when these systems don't understand local languages, cultural context, or the coded ways hate can hide in plain sight? Turns out, the real threat isn't just what gets missed—it's who gets erased.

So, is the system broken?

Not exactly, but it's **flawed**.

These moderation tools are trained on Western datasets and built around dominant language norms. That means jokes, memes, and slurs in local dialects?

Often invisible. But bold words from a human rights activist?

Flagged. Shadowbanned. Removed. And when context gets lost, censorship creeps in.

● Get In Touch With Us

SEADS is located at:

Building 2 Level 6, Monash University Malaysia
Jalan Lagoon Selatan, Bandar Sunway
47500, Selangor, MALAYSIA

Email: sheril.bustaman@monash.edu

Myth or Reality?



Governments and powerful actors can weaponize vague platform policies to silence dissent—claiming it's “hate speech” or “public disorder.” In reality? It's just people speaking truth to power.

So, what now?

We need culturally aware, context-sensitive moderation that includes local expertise—not just one-size-fits-all tech. We need transparency in how content decisions are made. And most importantly, we need to ask: who benefits when voices go quiet?

Because safety shouldn't come at the cost of truth.