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Digital Divides and Paradigm Shifts in the Time of COVID-19

Caroline Anne Yong Suk Zhen
Siu Tzyy Wei
Paul J. Carnegie

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

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Associate Professor Paul J. Carnegie, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Authors

Caroline Anne Yong Suk Zhen is currently majoring in Economics at the School of Business and Economics, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. She combines her economics background with an interest in international relations and politics. This paper was developed from an awarding winning entry in the ASEAN-Korea Essay Contest under the guidance of Associate Professor Paul J. Carnegie. Caroline shared the Special Recognition Award with her good friend and fellow student, Siu Tzyy Wei.

Contact: 18b1041@ubd.edu.bn

Siu Tzyy Wei is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. She combines her passion for sociology with an interest in international relations and politics. This paper was developed from an awarding winning entry in the ASEAN-Korea Essay Contest under the guidance of Associate Professor Paul J. Carnegie. Wei shared the Special Recognition Award with her good friend and fellow student, Caroline Anne Yong Suk Zhen.

Contact: 18b0111@ubd.edu.bn

Paul J. Carnegie is Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. His research specialises in comparative democratisation, human security, and localised responses to militant extremism with a specific focus on Indonesia and Southeast Asia alongside the Asia Pacific more generally. Paul has published widely in his fields including the monograph *The Road from Authoritarianism to Democratization in Indonesia* (Palgrave Macmillan), the edited volume *Human Insecurities in Southeast Asia* (Springer) and research output in leading international journals including *Pacific Affairs*, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* and *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. He is also a section editor for the Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity. Paul has extensive applied research experience and networks having lived and worked previously in Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Egypt, Fiji, and the United Arab Emirates.

Contact: paul.carnegie@ubd.edu.bn

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Digital Divides and Paradigm Shifts in the Time of COVID-19

*Caroline Anne Yong Suk Zhen
Siu Tzyy Wei
Paul J. Carnegie*

Abstract:

This paper considers whether regional digital partnership offers an effective strategy for post-pandemic recovery. To ground the paper in critical reflection, we combine personal impressions of our current situation with a discussion of the ways to achieve meaningful digital partnership. Drawing on work as varied as Thomas Kuhn, Bong Joon-ho, Nikolai Kondratieff and Piyawat Sivarak, the paper argues that our future wellbeing is predicated on our ability to bridge the digital divide and cooperate effectively for mutual benefit.

Keywords: COVID-19; Digital Partnership; Paradigm Shifts; Post-Pandemic Recovery

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Siu Tzyy Wei
Paul J. Carnegie*

Introduction

As we write this, on 11th March 2021, it has been 365 days since the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic and the struggle to protect humanity from this highly contagious virus really began in earnest. When the World Health Organization (WHO) first received alerts of a strange new virus in Wuhan, Republic of China on New Year's Eve, the significance of its real danger was still not clear. Misinformation and complacency abounded until the virus went on its unrelenting march, sweeping over one country after another.

On 9th March 2020, the Ministry of Health of Brunei Darussalam reported its very first case of COVID-19. Within four days, our university classes were moved online. Suddenly, students were nowhere on campus. Borders closed and people were forced to adapt to an unsettling shift in their lives as concern over the virus taking an unscheduled tour across the nation heightened. Parents started working from home and students did not step outside their homes for weeks. Friends lost jobs and businesses shut down. Previously buoyant student life became a constant routine of lagged Zoom classes; we can attest to over 14 hours of eye-popping screen time daily. Everyone was trying their best to stay afloat amidst a troubled sea of mental and emotional strain. When the curve eventually flattened for Brunei and restrictions were slowly lifted, the beep of temperature checks and click-scan of tracing apps became everyday white noise. Face masks our standard uniform, standing one metre apart our common courtesy; our new mundanity.

We are now a year into living with our uninvited caller, and the future seems markedly more uncertain. Of course, we know our short-term discomfort is for the greater good, but this does little to lessen the distress for the many people who have lost jobs and now rely on handouts or small online businesses just to make ends meet. Online study has also made education more ‘accessible for all’ but this largely downplays soaring internet bills and the expenditure to buy the now indispensable laptop, only to be shared with five other siblings. We are inundated with slogans to embrace our rapidly digitalising world, but a lack of access is a reality for many.

Is this really our new normal? It is a thought countless people have probably mulled over in these past few months. What has become increasingly apparent is that the pandemic is not exclusively a health issue but also a socio-political and economic wake-up call (Chan and King 2020). Writing in the Washington Post, Vanessa Williams (2020) notes, that in the US, the poor and lower class especially black Americans are more likely to die of COVID-19. The virus is telling us much about ourselves. It has exposed the shortcomings of the current political and economic arrangements of many countries in the face of real crisis. This has brought into stark relief disturbing levels of inequality alongside social welfare and health provision decline in many countries that had largely been ignored by our pre-pandemic preoccupations. With the above observations in mind, it is worth considering whether digital partnership is really the primary prescription for a post-pandemic recovery.

Inequalities and Paradigm Shifts

Inequalities are not new, but the pandemic has certainly attuned us to the scale of the problem. Millions are living today in something akin to a disease-driven poverty trap (Bonds et al. 2009). You and I are largely immune from such deprivations, whether we like to admit it or not. It is our position of privilege that makes the future look optimistic. But please take a step with us, to be uncomfortable, to see the reality, to exercise empathy. While there is much talk about advancing digital partnership, the plain truth is that many still do not have access to the internet. The present moment seems like a turning point for digital innovation, but when our everyday life is so reliant on surveillance, restrictions and QR codes, is this the progress we seek?

Our current situation has borne witness to significant changes in the way we have had to socialise; how we interact with each other and our behaviour as individuals. American physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962) once described a paradigm shift as a change in the basic

concepts and experimental practices of a scientific discipline; a change in how things work. The latter notion resonates in social contexts too when there are shifts in collective thinking or socio-economic relations. In these terms, we consider the pandemic as engendering a paradigm shift, for three reasons.

First, resource constraints. The issue of distribution of resources is more important than ever today (Carnegie et al. 2021: 1-28). It is easy when you have the access to catch up on the latest TikTok trend, order any food you want, make your medical appointment online and ignore the possibility that the person next to you may not even be able to afford to pay for the internet. It is becoming clearer that more equitable distributions of healthcare, food, shelter, water, and internet access are the basic prerequisites for equality of opportunity in a digital future.

Second, there are shifting perspectives on gender. This pandemic has shone a spotlight on world leaders, their competency and leadership skills. It has revealed that many countries that have managed effectively to contain the virus are led by women. For example, New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen and Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon have all outshone their male counterparts with their levels of honesty, empathy and informed yet firm decision making. In contrast, the likes of former president, Donald Trump in the US, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, or the UK's Boris Johnson tended towards bluster and equivocation on this most serious of issues. We know good leadership is not determined by gender- but what our female world leaders have shown us is that empathy is just as important as assertiveness. They have stepped up to the mark and demonstrated that evidence-based opinion and honesty is the best policy in a time of crisis.

The third aspect of the paradigm shift is our growing sense of common humanity. Paradoxically, the pandemic separated us physically but also brought us together. Although the pandemic has exposed our many human frailties especially ongoing political and economic shortcomings in the face of worsening environmental conditions, ultimately, we are in it together struggling for a better future. Competition is higher than ever, and yet as we compete, we somehow cooperate. Societal distinctions no longer look so important. Blue collar and white collar are not so separate after all. Almost overnight, those we took for granted are now 'essential' members of the society. Janitors, cleaners, delivery staff, construction workers, healthcare workers on the frontlines are our new heroes. We are moving to the realisation that solidarity and cooperation are more necessary than ever. There is no one else that can get us out of this other than ourselves, together; our common humanity in motion. However, the pandemic has exposed our

vulnerabilities and with that comes visibility. Interestingly, the ancient Greek meaning of the word ‘apocalypse’ is not ‘end of times’ but ‘unveiling’. It is in a time of unveiling that transformation is possible. We have an opportunity in the face of adversity, but a catalyst to what?

Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life

Considering the implications of life imitating art may reveal clues to such a question. When the movie *Parasite* first hit our screens many of us were rendered speechless. Apart from the flawless cinematography and stellar cast, it was unforgiving in skewering the socioeconomic inequalities of South Korean society, and by extension other developed countries. At one end of the spectrum, the struggling Kim family barely gets by living in their cramped basement home, eking out a gritty but boisterous existence and piggy backing on stray Wi-Fi signals. On the other, the affluent and olfactory-sensitive Park family lives comfortably above the slums of Seoul, with Park Dong-ik himself leading a successful, digitally driven business in the heart of the metropolis. Despite a lack of access to societal opportunities, the Kim family is every bit as intelligent, resourceful, and ingenious as the Park family minus the branded lifestyle and neuroses. As Park Dong-ik ascends the staircase of his luxury home and the Kims scamper back down to their underworld dwelling, it is patently clear who wins in society. And while director Bong Joon-ho did not serve up a palatable solution to mitigate the weight of his socioeconomic critique, he did leave a starkly satirical impression that the developed world we are privileged to live in, is nowhere near as developed and civilised as it assumes. In its darkly comedic way, if *Parasite* teaches us anything, it is that successful digital partnership will only be built on a basic human partnership of improved socio-economic fairness.

Not that K-Wave

As such, to pursue genuine digital partnership we must first seek to humanise digital partnership. In 1925, Russian economist Nikolai Kondratieff proposed a theory that claimed to identify links between long-term economic cycles and technological innovations. The latter transform periods of recession into upswings of prosperity. Despite criticism about oversimplification, it is difficult to ignore the predictive power of Kondratieff’s theory when placed alongside the historical sweep and coincidence of technological innovation with economic growth over the last century. From the

printing press and steam engine to the current Fourth Industrial Revolution, it is fair to say the world has benefitted from many different technological innovations. In our current pandemic moment, we may well be in the ebb phase of a Kondratieff wave but also on the cusp of dramatic technological innovation for the near future. The most immediate innovation is vaccines for COVID-19, the less obvious innovation may come in the guise of progressive social change. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) predicted, technology is not just something people use but a means by which they transform themselves. Although vaccine development stands as a major technological and medical advancement, a more telling societal shift could bring longer lasting progress for the greater good; people and technology working together to decrease disparities and increase cooperation. The success of such a digital future depends on our ability to humanise the economic asymmetries of our potential interconnectivity.

Becoming Agile

In 2019, ASEAN released a Statement on Promotion of Good Governance and Acceleration of an Agile Civil Service in a Digital Economy. The Deputy Secretary General of The Office of The Civil Service Commission Thailand, Piyawat Sivarak reaffirmed these commitments in the second issue of The ASEAN (2020): The Fourth Industrial Revolution, Pandemics and The Future of Work. As Sivarak (2020: 17) notes, “the statement calls for ASEAN Member States to concretise the concept of agility in order to enhance the capacities and capabilities of our civil service by improving our policies, processes, systems, and change-ready mindsets.” Sivarak (2020) reiterated the 5 steps encompassed under the acronym AGILE to facilitate the plan:

A- Anticipation and Awareness

G- Growth Mindset

I- Infinite Perseverance

L- Leverage Partnership

E- Employing Tech Wisely

Firstly, A is for ‘Anticipation and Awareness’. The dynamics and the effects of digital innovation need to be analysed and understood. That includes being able to foresee upcoming challenges and obstacles. To do so, people need to be aware of their surroundings and the people

in it. This is important because we tend to ignore the contextual range of digital exclusion faced by marginalised groups, not only in Southeast Asia, but around the world. Collective selective blindness to issues of power, politics and inequality is one of the major obstacles to meaningful digital innovation. Increasing inclusivity is necessary to avoid the dystopian vision of Bong Joon-Ho's Parasite. If we reach out our hands, then we can grasp the second letter of our acronym.

The second part of Sivarak's AGILE initiative is G, the 'Growth Mindset'. According to psychologist Carol Dweck (2006), our 'mindset' falls into two major types: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset are set in their ways and take feedback as criticism. People with a growth mindset take failures and challenges as opportunities to grow. Growth mindsets will be at a premium in transitioning to digital innovation and partnership. When we can anticipate and be aware of the situations around us that is a first step to growth. It is a mindset that can be applied in both a social context as well as political and economic contexts. As Albert Einstein was once credited with saying, 'the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.' It is going to take genuine political will alongside significant transnational financial backing and infrastructural coordination to create sufficient equality of opportunity for a diverse range of people and communities. This will require policy makers to take the bold innovative steps to bridge gaps, instead of deepening them.

To underscore the point, when the World Health Organization (WHO) reported the MERS outbreak in South Korea in 2015, the disease led to 186 confirmed cases, 36 deaths and at least 17,000 suspected cases. In response, the South Korean government redesigned their systems and policies to expand disease testing centres and testing capacities for possible future outbreaks. South Korea's missteps over the MERS outbreak precipitated a more successful management of the current COVID-19 pandemic. They took a previous failure as a lesson which has paid off in the long run.

Thirdly, I is for 'Infinite Perseverance'. A growth mindset is actualised with perseverance. The ability to brainstorm, think outside the box, and draft new policies will accelerate successful change. Positive thinking about change can lead to progress, which can result in Growth. It really comes down to a healthy dose of calculated risk taking and a good degree of trust. As members of the public, in times of uncertainty, we must trust those who control and represent the process to navigate the risks and ensure our well-being. Which brings us back to honesty, empathy, and respect. We tend not to trust policymakers because they are seen as lacking honesty, empathy, and

respect for those less fortunate than them (Carnegie et al. 2016). If we are to effectively manage the uncertainty and risk of our digital transition, then we must strive for trust in our relationships and the establishment of equitable opportunities. This will take perseverance on all sides.

Fourthly, L is for ‘Leveraging Partnerships’. According to Sivarak (2020: 18), forging a digital future will require “massive amounts of coordination and collaboration, both within and across boundaries, and linking of efforts at the local, national, regional and global levels”. It is vital for both policy makers and people alike to recognise that success relies on seizing opportunities for change, learning from mistakes and working as a team. As of today, the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF) has sponsored over 400 projects in cooperation with partner agencies to promote economic development and support education, health, disaster risk management and technology initiatives. Under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ACC) initiative, one of the ground-breaking projects is to enhance diagnostic capacities by providing equipment and training which can enable them to perform rapid diagnostics with accurate results in keeping with the ACC Blueprint 2009. It is initiatives like this that can facilitate the sharing of knowledge and make it possible for people to collaborate in bridging our socio-economic gaps and future challenges.

Lastly, E is for ‘Employ Tech Wisely’. This is a firm reminder that we are in a position of privilege, and that we have a duty to wield it wisely. According to Sivarak (2020: 18), “transformation challenges vary from organisation to organisation... certain technological solutions may not be a fit for the organisation.” If the best way to predict the future is to create it, then finding the right balance between progressing digitally and protecting people’s privacy and rights is necessary. It not simply a case of employing technology and allowing the ‘invisible hand’ of the market to decide. That alone is insufficient. There is a demand for proper regulation and implementation of policies to ensure more equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

There is much uncertainty in the world right now. Whenever you talk to friends and try to make plans for the future, there is a lot of ‘when all this is over’ and ‘if we ever get to leave’ sentiment expressed. The fact that COVID-19 knows no borders, boundaries, class, or race should be sign enough for countries to start addressing their own vulnerabilities by reducing inequalities and strengthening social welfare and health systems. As Max Planck (1950: 33) once surmised, “a new

scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” Meaningful digital partnership cannot exist when socio-economic inequality persists at unacceptable levels. That is an inconvenient truth, but the pandemic has also reminded many of the humanity in us. To navigate through our current uncertainties means going beyond the familiar and the world as we know it. This will take no small amount of courage and imagination. However, our human adaptability and ability to cooperate will be our greatest assets for the journey ahead. The late great Oceanian philosopher Epeli Hau’ofa was fond of saying, ‘we can’t change the direction of the wind, but we can always adjust our sails to reach our destination.’ Which way are we going to tack?

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