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CULTURES OF CRITICAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION IN ASIA

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Abstract

In the midst of a global dialogue on “fake news” and press legitimacy, the case for media literacy is more compelling than ever. Throughout the diverse media environments in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, and India, cultures of protest are closely tied to a proficiency in media literacy among educated youth. There is a paradoxical relationship between a country’s press freedom and the youth’s ability to criticize media; a free press does not necessarily imply a high level of media literacy. In order for there to be interest in media literacy on both an individual level and an institutional level, there must be incentive for people to aspire towards media literacy.

Questions

How empowered are readers of propagandistic dailies in China? How do lese-majeste censorship laws affect the knowledge of Thai readers? What resources do Singaporeans have to analyze nationalistic campaign posters? Effective media literacy programs require spaces for critical thinking. In countries where citizens face high-risk consequences for discussing anything, which might be interpreted as criticism of the nation, it is often easier to not talk about the problems at all — literally, the path of least resistance.

Expressions of Media Literacy

A decades-long dilemma in Hong Kong is the self-censoring spiral resulting from the CCP’s looming leadership. In 2014, over a thousand Hong Kong residents organized under the “Umbrella Movement.” The protest aimed to push back against China’s influence over Hong Kong’s legal system and media censorship, among other concerns. Protesting a biased media is media literacy in itself; without critical readership, the media would continue to skew coverage without consequence. Umbrella protest featured below:

Results

At the core of media literacy is a sense of protest. While definitions vary, it is often described as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. The proliferation of online news media lends itself to the proliferation of biased media or false information. The phrase “media literacy” is not as ubiquitous as that of “fake news,” but the ideas are inextricably tied in modern media discourse; identifying falsehoods in media is the cornerstone of media literacy. To reduce the proliferation of this kind of false information, governments must improve educational media literacy programs to better equip youth with critical media evaluation skills. However, incentives for creating these programs differ greatly among political systems and national agendas.

Press Freedoms Index Ranking

China: Innovations in Silencing

In mainland China, the decline of print newspaper subscriptions among young media consumers offers new and effective means for the government to simultaneously propagate and censor the news via microblogging applications. The transition from print to online media allows party-affiliated publishers to not only circulate nationalistic news, but also censor conversation.

Singapore: Co-opting Criticism

As a meritocratic system with strong interests in both advancing education and constructing a strong nationalistic education program, Singapore is at the crossroads between the costs and benefits of media literacy education. If the core value of media literacy is protest, it is not in their best interest to implement critical media literacy curriculum into their education system

Thailand: Maneuvering Taboo

In a political environment which prosecutes Thais for sedition, during an era which blurs the lines of social media and mass media, efforts towards anti-censorship activism are some of the most potent displays of media literacy. Young people find a way to maintain freedom of expression and speech through face-to-face social networks, rather than those that are enforced by firewall.

Conclusion

While some media literacy education movements are explicitly democratic, others exist only to bring “awareness” to new forms of media, as exemplified in scholarly work done in Singapore and China. In review, the data was so variant that I chose to refer to the Press Freedom Index sparingly, as it frames these media environments sans nuance. I found my hypothesis to be incorrect; higher press freedom does not imply higher degrees of media literacy.

The unfortunate irony of media literacy education is that its future lies in the hands of the state. The onus is on the institutions to arm the public with skills needed to evaluate the accuracy of the media they consume. While this is an unhelpful prospect for China, Thailand, and Singapore, scholars of Indian media literacy education have optimistic visions of cross-cultural understanding as the basis of public school curriculum.

Further Reading


