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Graduation Thesis

**\*\*THESIS TITLE HERE\*\* :)**

On the shrinking spaces of social media,  
in Indonesia and elsewhere

## **INTRODUCTION**

\*\*Short introduction. One or two paragraphs on the intention of this paper, and my perspective as a publisher.

Thesis Statement: While in Indonesia today, social media offers young people a valuable space for personal and political expression, deliberate and creative activism is needed to help female users in particular resist the rising pressures of state and self-censorship in the country.

## **PART 1 OLD WOUNDS**

To understand the current state of censorship in Indonesia, we first have to consider the volatile history of media power in the country. What does freedom of speech mean in this specific, post-colonial context? What is the experience of dissent in mainstream media, and how does this extend to politics? Who controls the news?

In Western contexts, the right to free expression is well established as one of the most important tenets of democracy, and of the notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). In contrast, the role of media freedom in Indonesian civil society remains unsettled and regularly contested (Steele, 2011). In the last century alone, opponents included the Dutch and Japanese colonial powers which were finally ousted during Indonesian independence in 1945, and the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, who took government control in 1966 and retained his position for more than thirty years (Ricklefs, 1993). Throughout these critical times in Indonesian history, censorship was actively exercised by the state across political, legal and psychological dimensions. Under these pressures, it's unsurprising that mainstream Indonesian media has tended to serve the interests of the state, doing little to challenge prevailing social or cultural hegemonies. To place our discussions on freedom of speech in context, this section will examine some of the political and cultural events that have brought us to where we are today.

### **NO OPPOSITION ALLOWED**

First, it's important to take a close look at the role of mainstream media in President Suharto's Indonesia. A respected military figure, Suharto became President amidst extreme social upheaval in 1966, and remained unchallenged in office until 1998. In his three decades of uninterrupted rule (an era known as the 'New Order') he sought to unify the country, and was successful in bringing about a period economic prosperity and political stability (Elson, 2002). But the price of success was high, and in strong contrast to his predecessor, Sukarno – who is widely seen as both a freedom fighter and a national hero – Suharto's legacy is one marred by violence, corruption and extensive human rights abuses (Shubert, 2008). Nicknamed 'The Smiling General', he was charming but lethal, and actively censored dissent in the Indonesian press. Writing about

that time, journalist Andreas Harsono says: “No opposition was allowed. Disagreement usually ended up in violent crackdowns, like those that have occurred in East Timor, Irian Jaya, Aceh, and other disputed territories.” (1996) One editor recalls ordering an entire page of his newspaper to be blacked out because government officials objected to an article and it was too late to change or replace it (Dhyatmika, 2014). By treating public criticism of his government as a direct threat to national security, Suharto was able to present any act of retaliation as both valid and necessary. And for millions of Indonesians, anxious to protect their hard-won sense of sovereignty, this was a reality that they were willing to accept.

One of the New Order’s main weapons in maintaining legitimacy and spreading propaganda, was the so-called Ministry of Information. Through this governing body, Suharto was able to closely monitor and restrict both domestic and foreign media (Aspinall, 2010). As a result, while living standards in the country rose, media freedom dwindled. To keep up appearances, the regime fiercely circumscribed all reference to any civil or political conflict both in news and entertainment media (Sen, 2011). In fact, whenever citizens protested, the state would respond by extending its censorship policies. In 1984, a law was passed requiring all publishing bodies to possess a press operating license which could be revoked at any time by the Ministry of Information (Aspinall, 2010). Over the next decade, the government used this legal precedent to scare private media owners into submission and to close down dozens of newspapers (Sen, 2011). Playing into cold-war tensions, subjects like communism and – to some extent – feminism, was made taboo (Wieringa, 1995).

However, by the 1990s, the growing Indonesian middle class was becoming restless with Suharto’s autocracy, and, buffeted by the winds of globalisation, the government’s grip on both politics and social issues was loosening. Suharto tried to hold on to power, using the same tactics of bureaucratic interference and violent intimidation. As recently as June 1994, the government shut down prominent news weeklies *TEMPO*, *DeTIK*, and *Editor*, after they published critical reports on Suharto’s military spending. In the aftermath, journalists and protestors were thrown in jail. According to Goenawan Mohamad, the former editor-in-chief of the banned *TEMPO*, this was a time where self-censorship had become a ritual for Indonesian reporters (Harsono, 1996). Looking back, it is clear that under Suharto’s leadership, entire generations were brought up in a media culture where free speech had become more of a risk than a right.

Next to editorial control of what was being reported over the news, the New Order also exercised economic control of domestic media industries. Suharto’s regime is widely known as one of the most corrupt in recent history, and for much of his rule, media ownership in Indonesia was dominated by just a few names in his elite political circle (Ida, 2011). Television in particular became an influential tool for controlling public opinion and nation-building, favored by Suharto for its reach and velocity (Kitley, 2003). From its first transmission in 1962 until 1989, the state-owned service TVRI enjoyed a total monopoly over television broadcasting in Indonesia. Many of

these industries were finally diversified in the 1990s, but unfortunately, money has turned out harder to move than even policy. This means that even though Suharto's government collapsed in 1998, many of the same old faces continue to dominate Indonesian news and television industries today (Ida, 2011). In fact, mainstream media ownership in the country is concentrated in only 12 large groups, and about half of them are controlled by oligarchs with "direct affiliations with political parties, and having been appointed positions in the government." (Tapsell, 2017) Though this has become a global issue as much as an Indonesian one, it is worth questioning especially in a country with such a short history of democracy, and such a long heritage of media control.

## **A SINGULAR IDENTITY**

Besides the legal and the political, we must also consider the psychological dimension of censorship. Suharto in particular was adept at shaping collective memory – and to some extent – revising history. The most striking example of this is the media blackout of the 1965 anti-communist purge, in which an estimated 500,000 to 1 million Indonesians were systematically and violently murdered by the state (Kwok, 2016). The massacre occurred at the height of the Cold War, triggered by the murder of six officers in a so-called 'attempted coup' of President Sukarno's government. It was this event which allowed General Suharto to declare a state of emergency, put the blame on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and effectively take control of the country (Heryanto, 2018). Backed by the U.S. government – who were happy to see the communist-sympathiser Sukarno ousted – Suharto's army proceeded to imprison and kill every PKI party member and suspected leftist in the country. This state-sponsored witch-hunt resulted in the elimination of every communist faction in Indonesian politics, and the decimation of the country's ethnic Chinese minority (Wieringa, 1995). Though today, this episode has been declared one of the bloodiest mass killings in modern history, Suharto's tight control of the media means it has been all but erased from the nation's collective memory. Instead, the public were only served the official version of events, which capitalised on sentiments of nationalism and fears of communism (Heryanto, 2018).

In this context, it was cinema which became the most popular and influential medium in Suharto's propaganda machine. Throughout the following decades, the state sponsored the production of dozens of films on the 1965 tragedy, including the wildly successful *Pengkhianatan G30 September* (Noer, 1984), a 4,5 hour epic which glorified the actions of the military and vilified their opponents. According to media theorist Ariel Heryanto, "There is no other example of propaganda, on or off the screen, which has had as much of an impact on Indonesian society as *Pengkhianatan G30 September*." (2018, p. 120) For most Indonesians, this film became the primary – perhaps the only – source of information on what happened during the events of 1965. Every television station in the country was required to broadcast the film on each anniversary of the event, and it became mandatory viewing for every middle-school student until at least 1999. At the same time, history textbooks were rewritten; edited by the same pro-Suharto historian who penned the original inspiration for the film (Renaldi, 2018). In this way, media censorship in the

time of Suharto was not merely a tool for erasing certain narratives, or even whole segments, of Indonesian society. It also allowed the state to replace these narratives with propaganda, and proscribe any kind of social criticism as subversive and communist (Wieringa, 1995).

As post-colonial scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it:

*“Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”* (1995, p. 26)

For a country so vast, and so diverse as Indonesia, these silence-making mechanisms were exceptionally powerful in establishing (and maintaining) a singular identity for the nation and its citizens. While this may have helped create political stability at one time, it has also resulted in some deep-seated social issues. To this day, the events of 1965 remain one of the most sensitive in Indonesian history, and the public discourse around it is marked with both wilful amnesia and misinformation (Renaldi, 2018).

## **THE CONTROL OF CULTURE**

The tendency to forget rather than confront certain parts of our history, adds another dimension to the impact and effectiveness of censorship in Indonesia. Practiced for long enough, repressive policies become quickly assimilated into our culture, which is traditionally hierarchical to begin with (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Following this, it's important to note that when it comes to freedom of expression, state control represents only one facet. Both religion and tradition have always played an important role in the public life of Indonesians, and it's useful to look at how power and censorship manifests itself in our indigenous social and cultural values.

First of all, we should bear in mind that Indonesia consists of hundreds of distinct native ethnic groups, spread across some 16,000 islands (The Jakarta Post, 2017). The largest group – and the most politically dominant, by far – are the Javanese, who make up some 40% of the entire population (Philpott, 2000). Like so many other South-East Asian cultures, Javanese can be described as a shame society, as opposed to a guilt society (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Popularized by cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict, the distinction lies in the way that morality is constructed and used in society. In guilt societies (which are often Western), internal structures take precedence: like that of individual authority and conscience. In shame societies, external factors are more important: how does your community see you? In Indonesia, this manifests itself in social structures in which pride, politeness, honor and collectivity are central cultural values – shaping everything from practices in conflict-management to politics and art (Vanhoe, 2016). Under the New Order, the concepts of honor-shame were hijacked and mobilized to support relations of hierarchy and deference, and constrain individuality (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Suharto's rhetoric

was powerful and simple: if 'being Indonesian' meant a return to traditional values, then to speak out in any kind of insubordination made you *un-Indonesian*.

It's also worth looking at the ways that traditional beliefs and customs affect the expression of gender roles in Indonesia. Censorship, whether formal or informal, is always attached to dynamics of power, and in a patriarchal society, they tend to disproportionately affect women: limiting their public activity, voice and agency (Collins & Bahar, 2000). In a series of letters written at the turn of the twentieth century, R.A. Kartini, considered Indonesia's founding feminist, laments the rigid structures and institutions of Javanese womanhood. As both a member of local aristocracy and a subject of Dutch colonialism, her freedoms were heavily restricted:

*"All our institutions are directly opposed to the progress for which I so long for the sake of our people (...) But we Javanese women must first of all be gentle and submissive; we must be as clay which one can mould into any form that he wishes."* (Kartini, 1921)

During her time, practices like polygamy and child marriage were customary in Indonesia, while girls' education was practically nonexistent. Kartini herself was placed into seclusion at age 12, prohibited from leaving her family home (and of engaging in any kind of public life) until she was ready to be married (Woodward, 2015). While many of these customs have evolved or disappeared with time, gender roles in Indonesia – and specifically, women's freedom to control their voice and image in society – continue to be impacted by the whims of politics and religion.

Ultimately, these actors combined make for a complex media landscape. Throughout the periods of Dutch Imperialism, Independence, and the New Order, censorship has clearly played a fundamental role in supporting both political power and national identity in Indonesia. But after decades of repression, the mid-90s had become a time of mass public discontent (Philpott, 2000). This was the stage on which, in 1998, the combination of a financial crisis and a student-led protest movement finally forced Suharto to resign from office; and the country entered a new era of democracy. At precisely the same time, a digital revolution was sweeping across the region (Heryanto, 2018). Knowing this, my next question as a publisher is, how did the arrival of Internet culture affect freedom of speech in Indonesia? In the next section, we will look at the ways in which new and networked media have amplified the public voice in Indonesian society, and created new modes for political and personal expression.

## **PART 2**

### **NEW MEDIA**

The relationship between the Internet and democracy is not straightforward. Since its globalization, it has been hailed as a tool for freedom, and in equal measures denounced as a machine of control (Chun, 2006). While debate continues, the fact remains that at the end of the twentieth century, the overthrow of several authoritarian governments across Asia coincided exactly with the dramatic spread of this new medium (Sen & Hill, 2011). In Indonesia, the arrival of Internet technologies in the mid 1990s was a boon to both free speech advocates and political activists. By breaking media monopolies, allowing anonymous communications and providing unfiltered flows of information, the emergence of the Internet in Indonesia was—at the very least—a catalyst to its political revolution (Lim, 2003). Indeed, the movement for democratization that finally ousted Suharto in May 1998 was largely driven by a call for press freedom, freedom of information and freedom of expression (Sen & Hill, 2011). But how exactly was this media reform accomplished? And looking through the lens of the present, how does the digital revolution continue to challenge censorship culture in Indonesia today?

#### **FROM THE WARNET TO THE REFORMATION**

To understand the Indonesian Internet we have to begin at its smallest but most popular access point: the *warnet*. Short for '*warung Internet*' (or Internet café in Indonesian), these hybrid spaces first appeared in 1995, bringing independent dial-up connections to the wider Indonesian society (Warf, 2013). Built on top of existing cultural sites of commerce and community, the *warnet* represented more than just an entry point to cyberspace, or an opportunity to access previously unavailable information. During the last years of the New Order, they also provided a civic space for dialogue, and for both the production and consumption of alternative public discourse (Lim, 2003). This social component made the *warnet* specifically effective in supporting grass-roots citizen action. Connected as they were to traditional network structures, information was able to spread quickly beyond the computer and to the masses. Suddenly, those with limited power were able to challenge long-held media hierarchies, and create their own forms of identity, culture, and community.

Following this, it was students and journalists who were the first to truly exploit the Internet in Indonesia, using it to communicate and organize against the control of the state (Harsono, 1996). Underground mailing lists became a powerful new tool to share controversial information like news related to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), details of Suharto's wrongdoings, or even reports by journalists who were shut out of the mainstream media (Lim, 2003). Among the most important of these were *Apakabar*, *Pijar*, *SiaR* and *PIPA*, which were moderated by different journalists and academics in and outside of Indonesia. They each served their subscribers with daily dispatches from both local and foreign newspapers, with links to critical sources, and most crucially, with instructions on how to further disseminate the information via fax and print-outs. The

government tried, but ultimately struggled to intervene. "They could ask Internet providers to censor Web sites but not e-mails," said a leading news editor of the time (Harsono, 1996). By early 1998, controversial documents (including a list of Suharto's wealth) had spread through the lists like wildfire, circulating from *warnet* to *warnet* and via photocopy to photocopy (Lim, 2003). As the pressure mounted, it became clear that old tactics of censorship could no longer hold these new networks of information. In May of the same year, Suharto resigned; opening up the path to a fully-fledged Indonesian democracy.



In the years that followed, press freedom practically exploded across Indonesia. A new period of reform had begun, characterized by the process of democratization and decentralization (Sen, 2011). Journalists wasted no time in putting pressure on the government to remove excessive restraints on the media and to institutionalize new freedoms. Within months, the newly appointed President Habibie overturned the draconian licensing regimes of the New Order. Then, in 1999, a landmark Press Law was passed, which limited the power of the government and guaranteed the fundamental principles of freedom of expression, and the right to gather and disseminate information (Steele, 2018). Suharto's Ministry of Information was abolished, and without the threat of censorship, local and alternative media institutions flourished, from community radio stations to independent newspapers and watchdog associations (Ida, 2011). Journalists and citizens alike



remember the end of the 90s as a politically and culturally transformative period. Devi Asmarani, founder of Indonesia's first contemporary feminist online magazine, describes the so-called *Reformasi* era as: "The heyday of journalism in Indonesia. It was a time that was very turbulent, but also very hopeful. I learnt a lot about how the media can impact society." (\* [add reference to interview](#)) Thanks to these chaotic but progressive years, Indonesian news media and pop culture was becoming more diverse than ever.

## **A NEW GENERATION OF NETIZENS**

Over the next decade, the Indonesian media landscape changed rapidly. Spurred on by the rapid growth of tech industries in Asia, and the rising population of the urban middle class, mobile phone and internet usage skyrocketed in the early 2000s (Heryanto, 2018). Like many countries in the region, Indonesia moved to by-pass earlier stages of telecommunication technology, and jumped to digital technology at a level more comparable to industrialized countries. As the nation continued to develop its political identity post-Suharto, the digital sphere expanded dramatically, providing a new platform of dialogue between high and popular culture; and mainstream and alternative activities. Today, with a user base of over 130 million people, Indonesia has the largest and fastest growing Internet economy in the region (Singh, 2018).

But what are these users doing online? Studies show that like so many of its post-colonial neighbours, Indonesia has taken to social media with exceptional fervor (Abbott, 2011). By 2012, 90% of online activities in the country were devoted to browsing social networking sites with Facebook, Youtube and Instagram as the dominating platforms (Hapsoro, 2018). In fact, Indonesia now has the fourth largest number of Facebook users in the world, and the third largest for Instagram (We Are Social, 2018). With such numbers, it's unsurprising that in the country's young democracy, social media has had an enormous impact on Indonesian civil society.

Thanks to its velocity, its polyvocal and participatory nature, meme culture in particular has become inseparable from Indonesian political discourse. In contrast with traditional mass media, memes encapsulate the most fundamental aspect of modern digital culture: sharing. In her 2014 book, Limor Shifman defines memes as groups of digital items with common characteristics, which are self aware and socially constructed, then transformed via the Internet by many users. She goes on to say that, "Although memes spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindsets, forms of behaviour and actions of social groups." (p.17) It is this link between self and the collective, the personal and the political, which make memes especially effective channels for humour and social criticism.

In Indonesia, memetic media has in particular made politics more accessible to the masses. The rise of the internet has in itself changed the way we perceive political participation, as something that was once a practical and formal activity (of voting, for example) to something that includes more informal interactions like commenting on news items or following political meme accounts

(Hapsoro, 2018). While Internet campaigns in Indonesian electoral politics can be traced back to the first post-Suharto general election in 1999, it was not until the 2014 Presidential elections that social media assumed a central role (Lim, 2017). Satirical memes became a driving force in the intense contestation between the two main candidates, Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo (Wadipalapa, 2015). During this time, the clash between supporters was particularly visible on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Simultaneously, Internet memes were increasingly becoming a vehicle for political dissent amongst Indonesian youth, mainly by highlighting the absurdities in politics and discrepancies in campaign promises (Allifiansyah, 2016). **\*\*Add visual examples of memes**

In 2017, election-memes once again performed as a distinctive means of discourse in the Jakarta gubernatorial election. During these campaigns, each of the three candidates appointed a social media team as part of their branding strategy. All three were also found to have employed 'buzzers', netizens who are recruited to promote (share, like, follow) issues that benefit the particular candidate (Hapsoro, 2018). In this way, content spread quickly from platform to platform, amassing reach that often exceeded that of mainstream news media sites. At its peak, the campaign and related mass rallies became a social media daily menu for Indonesians, which often had real consequences, both online and offline (Lim, 2017). While not always constructive, one of the results of this process is a dramatic increase in political interest and participation in the country, especially in young people (Wadipalapa, 2015). By bringing with it the codes of pop culture, memes—and the conversations around them—have allowed Indonesian politics to feel more inclusive and approachable, where they have so often felt elitist. **\*\*Add quotes from interviews**

Of course, its knack for social levelling makes the Internet an even more valuable tool for those beyond the mainstream. Around the world, netizens have been quick to use online spaces to support emerging grassroots communities and fragile subcultures. Professor of gender and media studies Larry Gross explains that, "The potential for friendship and group formation provided by the Internet is particularly valuable for members of self-identified minorities who are scattered and often besieged in their home surroundings." (2003) In Indonesia, blogs, websites, chat rooms and social networking platforms have become important spaces for social movements like those supporting LGBTQ or women's rights. Over the past two decades, web-based news portals like OurVoice Indonesia, or platforms like *melela.org*, which hosts coming out stories for and by Indonesian LGBTQ citizens, have become increasingly popular. Feminist organizations were also among the first to take advantage of the Web in Indonesia, with online publications like *Jurnal Perempuan*, founded in 1996, reaching their audiences primarily through digital and social media (Widianto, 2016). Furthermore, marginalized communities have flourished in private and public groups across mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp, creating pockets of safe spaces where like-minded individuals can meet and share content. While

often short-lived and small in scale, these new channels undoubtedly help in directing more information and attention to issues still considered taboo in Indonesian mainstream media.

All things considered, networked media culture has proven to be a vital political force in Indonesian civil society. Vital, because of its reach and velocity (a significant advantage in a country of 263 million people), and political, because it has so much to do with power – and because its position as the vernacular media of the masses will always be contested by the mainstream institutions which precede it. In Indonesia, this tension is made more acute by the latter's historical role as purveyors of propaganda and censorship. But what happens when these mechanisms evolve? While facilitating freedom of expression, social media is also being used to promote unprecedented forms of surveillance, spread misinformation, and support the rise of online radical groups (Lim, 2017). Knowing that technology in itself is never neutral (Haraway, 1991), it would do us well to regard social media with the same critical eye.

### **PART 3 BACKLASH**

Today, the optimism of the so-called Reformation era is on the wane. Twenty years after the explosive onset of both democratic and media freedom, Indonesia is facing yet another crossroads in its political and cultural evolution. New and powerful forces, like the rise of conservatism and political Islam, are producing a different kind of challenge to our hard-won freedom of expression (Heryanto, 2018). The effects are at times confusing and alarming: while media usage and access to information in the country seems to be growing, the scope and diversity of discourses seem to be shrinking. Both online and offline, the backlash seems to be escalating; and in some cases, leading to a resurgence in levels of censorship. In fact, according to a recent index on media freedom, "Indonesia was the worst-performing country in 2017, falling by 20 places in the global rankings from 48th to 68th position." (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017) In this section, we will take a closer look at the current state of freedom of speech in Indonesia, paying special attention to the formal and informal silencing mechanisms which play out online.

#### **BLOCKED SITES AND BLURRED BODIES**

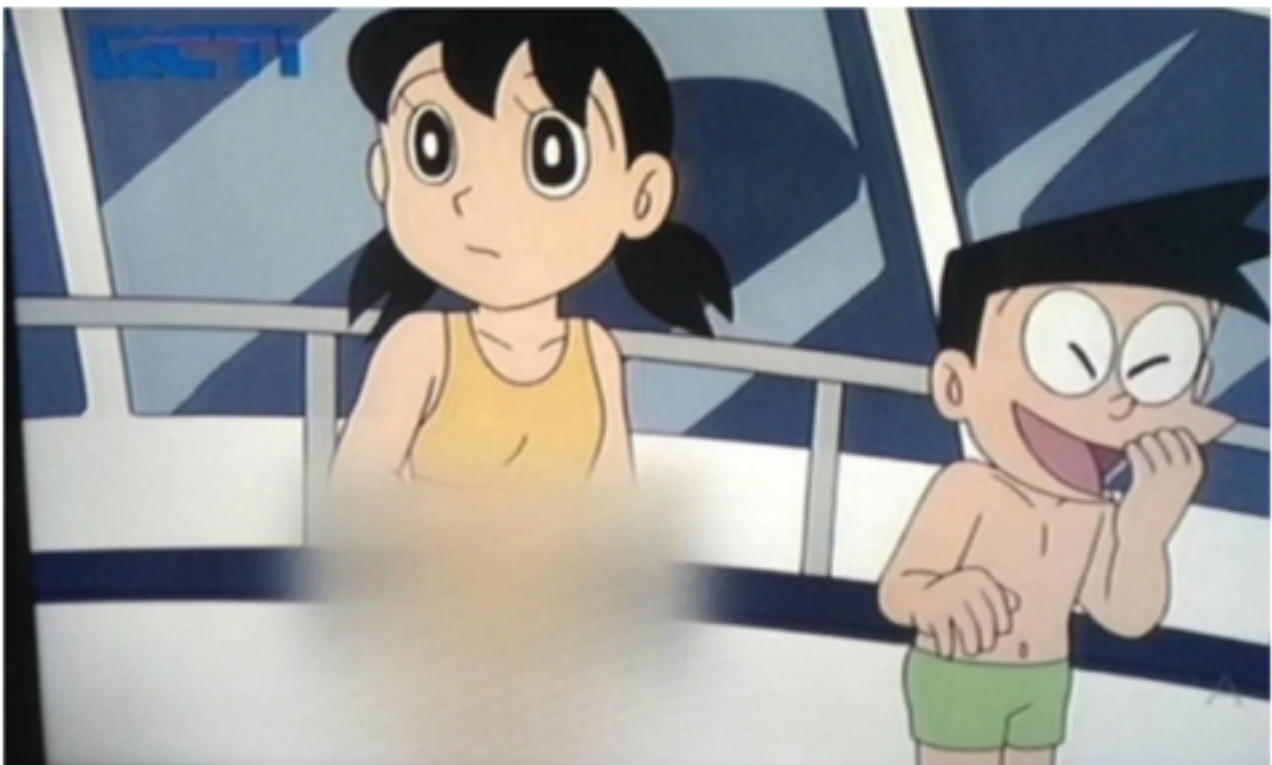
Precisely because the Internet has opened up so many new avenues for personal and political expression in Indonesia, it has in itself become a target for censorship, regulation and control. This is a phenomenon which extends throughout the region, and can be traced back to the period directly following 9/11. Since then, many Asian governments like China and Singapore have increased surveillance activities online, utilising firewalls and even arresting cyber-dissidents (Gan, Gomez & Johannan, 2004). In Indonesia, it was not until 2008, amid rising religious and ethnic tensions in the country, that selective blocking of some websites began.

In the first reported case, the Indonesian government ordered all ISPs to place a temporary ban on any file-sharing video websites – including Youtube – in an attempt to censor an anti-Islamic film, *Fitna*. The government cited fear of unrest within the nation as the reason for the ban, a justification they would come to use more regularly over the next decade (OpenNet Initiative, 2011). Later the same year, two widely controversial legislations were passed: the Electronic Information and Transaction Law, and the Anti-Pornography law, which effectively gave the Indonesian government authority to both prevent and prosecute against the dissemination of any content they considered “negative” or “culturally inappropriate,” – terms so broad that it includes everything from terrorism to gambling and nudity (FreedomHouse, 2017). Though the control of pornography is not new in Indonesia, it has become an especially sensitive issue in the past decade, thanks to several high-profile cases and celebrity scandals. Furthermore, the 2008 bill presents a bafflingly loose definition of what constitutes pornography, “to the point of criminalizing actions such as the kissing of lips in public, the display of sensual parts of the body, or any form of art and cultural expression perceived to be explicit.” (Open Net Initiative, 2011). This law, and the haphazard way in which it is typically enacted, is a perfect example of how easily the censorship of media in Indonesia can become a censorship on behaviour.

As selective and inconsistent as it is, web blocking continues to be a thorn in the side of Indonesian cyberactivists and average citizens alike. Try to access pop culture touchstones like Vimeo, Tumblr, Netflix or reddit today, and you’ll be greeted with the ‘*Trust Positive*’ block-page, the Indonesian government’s official filtering application. In January 2018, a new “crawling system” was launched, which searches internet content and issues alerts when inappropriate material is found. Speaking to Reuters in a recent article, Indonesia’s Minister of Communication and Information explained, “We just put some sort of key words there, most of them are pornographic.” (Davies, 2018). Casting with such a crude net, means that these activities are especially harmful to vulnerable groups who depend on the internet as an alternative space for expression. Indeed, this system is routinely utilised in the censorship of gay and lesbian content on the internet, and as religious conservatives continue to gain power in politics, crackdowns on the LGBTQ community are only increasing (Widianto, 2016). At the same time, the world’s largest media platforms do not do enough to challenge these discriminatory regulations. Acquiescing to requests by the Indonesian government, Google removed 73 LGBT-related apps from its Play Store in last year (Davies, 2018). Unfortunately, appeals by both media rights advocates and women and minority rights groups have had little to no success in court.

Censorship in the realm of film and television broadcasting has also been on the uptick in the last several years. Using the same rhetoric of protecting ‘decency’ and ‘public dignity’, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) and the Film Censor Board (LSF) have amped up their surveillance activities, again with disproportionate scrutiny on sexuality and nudity. Fearing sanctions, overzealous censorship among television stations has become a common occurrence, in some cases causing public uproar and ridicule. In 2015, scenes from several cartoons

including *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Doraemon*, were blurred to hide the bodies of certain female characters who were wearing swimsuits (Siddharta, 2017). In 2016, during a Miss Indonesia pageant show, broadcasters blurred the contestants entire torsos while they were wearing the Kebaya, the traditional Indonesian clothing for women (Rustan, 2016). Such incidents have become fodder for meme-makers, while mainstream media tends to stay relatively quiet on the issue. Women's rights advocates rightly question the hypocrisy of these governing bodies, who seem to be more concerned about controlling the female image, while other issues such as breaches of journalistic ethics go unchecked (Siddharta, 2017). At the same time, with hate speech, fake news and radicalism on the upswing in the region, questions of what is being censored (and by whom?), will only become more pertinent.



*Pic by NSTP/Courtesy of SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST*

## **MEDIA AND MORALITY**

It's clear that in comparison to the political censorship which characterised the New Order, the current landscape of media control in Indonesia is much more focussed on social and cultural regulation. In the same vein, there has been a palpable shift in Indonesian civil society away from secularism, and towards a more conservative political and religious identity. Thanks to an amalgam of both national and transnational forces, the moderate brand of Islam which Indonesia was once known for (and which I clearly remember from my childhood) is quickly losing ground to a more restrictive and myopic version. As another presidential election approaches later this year, one question looms larger than any other: who are we as a nation, if neither systems of authoritarianism nor liberal democracy feel quite right?

In this loaded atmosphere, where both sides of the political spectrum are scrambling to gain favour and influence, discourse around what constitutes as 'good' and 'bad' media are treated as wider issues of public morality. As media theorist Jennifer Lindsay describes,

*"The proscriptive role of religion in determining clear rules of behaviour, of determining guidelines of right and wrong, found a match in the proscriptive role of media regulation, which establishes clear guidelines about what can and cannot be shown, to whom, where, when and under what conditions."* (Lindsay, 2011, p. 188).

Clearly, when the boundaries between mediated and non-mediated worlds become blurred, the desire to control one cannot be separated from the desire to control the other.

For this reason, to talk about censorship in Indonesia today is to open up an increasingly complex can of worms. It's no longer enough to look at the regulatory actions of the state, or indeed at the destabilizing role of new media technologies. We must also consider less visible kinds of oppression, and examine the psychological dimensions at play. I've come to understand that it is in this space where self-censorship eventuates. Against the backdrop of intense political contestations and the slippery slope of nationalism, Indonesian citizens are increasingly policing themselves, and each other. Fear—of scandal as much as of punishment—becomes the single most potent editorial force in this honor-shame society, influencing everything from what journalists write in the paper, to the how women dress in the streets (Tapsell, 2012).

This message is reinforced every time a high profile detractor is jailed. In 2016, the incumbent governor of Jakarta became embroiled in the most heated blasphemy case ever to be played out in the public sphere. The politician in question, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, commonly known as Ahok, is progressive, Chinese-Indonesian, and also the city's first Christian governor in nearly fifty years. Though loved by many on the left, his unconventional identity was enough to make him a controversial figure. Playing into both old and new religious and ethnic intolerances, his opposition mounted a smear campaign attacking his character. Tensions escalated quickly, coming to a head in December 2016. In reaction to a single remark Ahok had made about the Quran, hundreds of thousands of Indonesians marched in Jakarta, demanding that he be arrested for allegedly insulting Islam (Lim, 2017). Once again, social media played a central role in the events that followed. Using hashtags such as #aksibelalIslam (action to defend Islam), #aksibelaQuran (action to defend Quran), #aksidamai (peaceful action), #tangkapAhok (arrest Ahok), and #penjarakanAhok (jail Ahok), his opposition flooded news feeds in the country, filling the channels with noise. By the time of his trial, the stakes had become desperately high. In the face of a divided country, would President Joko Widodo, once an ally to Ahok, be brave enough to step in? Or would Ahok be martyred to placate the angry masses? And finally, what would a guilty verdict mean for Indonesia's democracy? In a wildly controversial decision, the courts ultimately sided with the mobs, and sentenced the governor to two years in jail.

## **DON'T FEED THE TROLLS**

Cases like these point to the immense social and political influence of organized trolls and paid propaganda. Using sophisticated networks of fake accounts and automated bots, political parties around the world are quickly learning to wield social media as a weapon. In the 2016 US presidential election, a Russian trolling operation was found to have had a weekly reach of some 30 million Facebook users (Ng, 2017). Across the world, advocates for President Rodrigo Duterte were leading some of the most effective disinformation campaigns ever seen on the same platform, with some groups in the campaign reported to have up to 800,000 members (Ressa, 2016). And because they so often disregard truth and play up emotions, these operations are rewarded by the click-driven-algorithms that power our social media feeds. And unfortunately, the effect quickly snowballs. A major new MIT study has found that fake news travels “significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” (Polianskaya, 2018).

Returning to the context of Indonesia, low levels of media literacy add yet more fuel to the fire. A recent study found that at least 62% of Indonesian netizens have received fake news items via hard-to-police chat services like WhatsApp, while 92% of respondents received them on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (Renaldi, 2018). The largest known group responsible for spreading this kind of incendiary material in Indonesia call themselves the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA). Members describe MCA as a shadow organization, with no central office or leader, but which works in the legal grey area to deliver coordinated political and religious campaigns across the most popular platforms. One of the most notable activities of the MCA, is the harassment, intimidation and persecution of individuals deemed to have insulted Islam online (Juniarto, 2018). Immediately following the blasphemy proceedings against Ahok in 2016, the group released a video entitled “*Tim Pemburu Penista Agama*” (Blasphemer Hunter Team), which immediately went viral. Accompanying the video, was a closed Facebook group which invited members to add names to a list of “People Wanted by the Muslim Community” – a provocative and dangerous practice which incited anger as well as fear. The MCA have also been known to manufacture imitation profiles of their critics designed to offend the Muslim community, and even to acquire and mobilise the accounts of dead people (ibid.). Through mass confusion, these operations are able to divide and conquer almost any issue; one news feed at a time.

Of course, as dependent as they are on real human interaction, social media campaigns often have hard to predict and even harder to measure consequences. In Indonesia, Islamist conservatives have become the local equivalent of America’s alt-right: just as adept at online disruption and manipulation, and waging cyberwarfare right under the noses of most netizens (Lindsey, 2018) And just like the alt-right, their activities affect more than electoral politics, and are often perfect vehicles for spreading populist and supremacist ideologies throughout all levels of society.

## **ON CYBERMISOGYNY**

It is in this way, that women have become one of the most vulnerable victims of our social media culture. In Indonesia as well as globally, women are becoming more active online; however, the Internet continues to be a male-dominated space (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015). In Silicon Valley offices, in troll farms and on 4Chan messageboards, men outnumber women consistently. Where this becomes immediately more problematic, is in the level of verbal and sexual harassment which is directed at women online. In 2014, the “Gamergate” controversy brought this issue into the spotlight, as a number of prominent female gamers endured a vicious campaign of cybermisogyny that included death threats, rape threats, and doxing (the leaking of private information).

Since then, things have hardly changed for the better. A recent study conducted by Amnesty International found that on average, a woman is abused on Twitter every 30 seconds (Grothaus, 2017). In cultures like Indonesia, where gender norms are so closely linked to religion, Islamist conservatives increasingly police what women can and can't do on social media, sometimes to devastating effect. In September 2018, the 22 year old Iraqi model and social media star Tara Fares, was gunned down by motorcyclists in Baghdad. Reports warned that the killing was part of “a targeted effort against young women believed to be shirking the country's conservative traditions” (Specia, 2018).

In Indonesia, efforts to suppress women's voices and images online are also intensifying. Over the past few years, religious programming on television have become more popular, while self-appointed Muslim clerics are taking to Youtube to deliver dramatic sermons about the right and wrong way to be a Muslim. Using sensationalist headlines and colorful memes, these pseudo-spiritual leaders tell women to wear headscarves, marry young and renounce education. Feminists are labeled ‘anti-Islam’ and gender equality questioned as a ‘Western ideology’, while at the same time, old taboos, like interfaith relationships, are reinstated with vigor. On Instagram—one of the fastest growing platforms among Indonesian women—dogmatic and tribalistic hashtags like #antiselfie, #indonesiatanpapacaran (self described as “A movement to erase pre-marital dating from Indonesia”), #hijrah (a recently popularized term, akin to a religious awakening) and #akhwatbercadar (Muslim sisters wearing veils) are gaining momentum.

I've also recently come across profiles targeting young Muslim women, which offer 'Account-deleting' services. They address Indonesian girls who have recently started wearing the hijab, and tell them they must erase all evidence of their previous unholy lives – including any avatar or photograph of themselves pre-hijab. In my opinion, this is just another example of how censorship in Indonesia has become entangled with veiled acts of intimidation, coercion and even revisionism. As a biracial, non-muslim Indonesian woman myself; I find these trends jarring and deeply discomfoting. And I am not alone in this. Fearing persecution, average netizens are



learning to avoid posts and threads deemed too political or religious in nature. **\*\*Add quotes from interviews\*\***

Cases like these are creating dangerous precedents and immense pressures on freedom of speech and religion elsewhere in the country. According to a 2017 report by Freedom House, under the current administration of President Joko Widodo, “religious and other minorities face ongoing harassment and intimidation, often with the tacit approval of local governments and security forces.” Online, spaces which once felt emancipatory are devolving into heated battlegrounds. Indonesian media theorist Merlyna Lim explains the phenomenon as such: “While encouraging freedom of expression, social media also emboldens freedom to hate, where individuals exercise their right to voice their opinions while actively silencing others” (2017). Perhaps, by unravelling the silencing mechanisms we use on each other, we can reveal more about the voices currently being shut out of these platforms. And then the question becomes: can we talk back to these problematics, and propose new practices to resist them?

## **PART 4 INTERVENTIONS**

Unfortunately, self-censorship is a difficult habit to dismantle. Not least because it has become part and parcel of contemporary Indonesian public culture, perpetuated by politics and nurtured by old patriarchal systems. Left unchallenged, even social media—once so valuable for freedom of expression—has become much less welcoming to alternative ideas and identities. So how can we, as publishers and artists, intervene? Can we offer new understandings of censorship in the modern era, and suggest radical ways to redress the balance? The fourth and final section of this thesis will explore some of the pressure points on the horizon, and sketch out potential frameworks for beating censors at their own game.

### **OLD AND NEW APPROACHES**

In recent years, governments and activists alike have been scrambling to address the problems of social media. One line of thought involves pushing tech companies to take more responsibility for what is posted on their platforms (Scott, 2018). Unfortunately, this has proved largely ineffective. While some companies respond by upping the use of human moderation and third-party fact-checkers, little is being done to change the fundamental business model driving the design of these platforms (Tufekci, 2018). At the same time, almost every social media giant has said it would cooperate with local government agencies, blocking content and working on new censorship tools, sometimes on a case-by-case basis (Tan, 2017). As a result, transparency and accountability become even more difficult to uphold. It isn't difficult to see that we are doing all citizens (and the Internet) a disservice when we ask the Zuckerbergs of the world to be the ones to draw the line between free speech and online safety.

So, regulatory action aside, what alternative approaches are available to us as artists and media activists? What existing tactics and tools can we look to, and can we share them with the average netizen? Perhaps, when in troll spaces, we should do as the trolls do. Or can we make allies of existing methodologies, learning from the toolbox of activists, pranksters, hackers or gamers?

To begin with, we should note that efforts to 'protect the Internet' go back decades. The term 'hacktivism' was coined in 1994, and even before then, skilled computer users, critical media warriors and other individual users have been responsible for some of the most innovative Internet technologies, from open source/free software platforms to P2P networks and encryption systems (Delbert, 2008). Today the movement includes tools that support anonymous communication online (e.g. Tor), technologies that circumvent censorship and support privacy (from psiphon and peacefire, to Marcell Mars' *Logan and Jessica*) and alternatives to mainstream social networks, such as Mastodon and Telegram.

Another approach, is to disrupt by infiltrating and repurposing existing technologies. In China, anonymous activists have begun using blockchain to both spread and document censored material (Singh, 2018). Another example is the well-known project Politwoops. The service tracks all tweets deleted by public officials and political parties; using Twitter's own streaming API to comment on the accountability and transparency of its users (ProPublica, 2019). Similar tactics of redirection are also being used to intervene in conversations within social networking apps. In Myanmar, where pervasive hate speech online has fueled violent attacks on the Rohingya population, one citizen initiative is pioneering the use of 'Counterspeech' – a practice of direct and organized counter-messaging on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, seeking to undermine and defuse such harmful speech acts, without resorting to regulatory methods like censorship or takedowns (Benesch, Ruths et al, 2016). \*\* add example: [Jonas Lund Operation Earnest Voice](https://jonaslund.biz/works/operation-earnest-voice-brexit-division/) <https://jonaslund.biz/works/operation-earnest-voice-brexit-division/>

## **DO FEED THE TROLLS**

In Indonesia, efforts to address oppressive and extremist content on social media still seem scattered at best. Two common approaches I've come across include the demarcation of safe spaces for vulnerable groups through moderated accounts on popular platforms, and one-to-one combat against right-wing radical groups online. In the former, activists build and maintain protected pockets of like-minded communities, like the Indonesia Feminis group on Facebook, or the myriad of private LGBTQ support accounts on Instagram. In the latter, loosely affiliated volunteers take to their laptops, smartphones and internet cafés to counter propaganda machines by the Islamic State and its local supporters. Their methods are straightforward, and aimed specifically at young Muslims vulnerable to radicalization. Speaking in a recent interview, one volunteer said that his work includes the making of anti-extremist memes, countering negative

interpretations of religious quotes, conversing with pro-ISIS accounts and training others in social media literacy (Varagur, 2016).

However, without explicit support from the Indonesian government, it seems that the troll frams and social media armies of the world will always be a few steps ahead. So, why not learn from them? Trolling for good, or ideological trolling, offers a different approach to more traditional forms of comment section activism in that the practice deliberately and openly embraces the more deviant aspects of cyberwarfare. The first example that comes to mind, is the case of Anonymous, perhaps the world's most well known collective of trolls turned political activists. Before 2008, the moniker Anonymous was used almost exclusively for what one Anon describes as "Internet Motherfuckery" (Coleman, 2014). Rising out of the depths of 4chan bulletin boards, and once denounced by Fox News as "The Internet Hate Machine", its adherents wear many faces, shifting easily from mischievous trolling raids to high-profile political operations. In the last decade, its members have become key players in global struggles like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Today, the group's nebulous identity remains one of its defining characteristics:

*"Beyond a foundational commitment to the maintenance of anonymity and a broad dedication to the free flow of information, Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program. Given that Anonymous's ancestry lies in the sometimes humorous, frequently offensive, and at times deeply invasive world of Internet trolling—the core logic of which seems, at least at first glance, to be inhospitable to the cultivation of activist sensibilities and politicized endeavors—it is remarkable that the name Anonymous became a banner seized by political activists in the first place." (idem.)*

All things considered, one question for further study might be: where do the activities of ideological trolling and art intersect with the activities of the average Internet user? The social Web is participatory by nature after all; so it stands to reason that there are ways to invite passive spectators into becoming active collaborators. Can artistic interventions play a role in this effort?

## **TACTICAL MEDIA**

The concept of tactical media, with its mix of creative subversion and subversive creativity, can offer some grounding here. According to one of the key theorists of the discourse, Geert Lovink, tactical media is: "What happens when the cheap "do it yourself" media are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture" (Garcia and Lovink, 2007). With its origins partly stemming from the counterculture of the 1960s, tactical media use is characterized by a critical, often opportunistic engagement with popular media texts and technologies, and by a certain transient and temporary dimension—a sense of "hit and run, draw and withdraw, code and delete" (Melke, 2008). Like its close cousin culture jamming, it is interventionist by nature, and often deals with the visual or performative reversal of media power

(Renzi, 2008). For artists and activists looking to better understand and lay bare the hidden structures of technoculture, tactical media is therefore a useful framework to keep in mind.

Known to many as the ultimate tactical media practitioners, The Yes Men have originated another term to describe their work: that of 'identity correction'. They define the strategy as a kind of honourable inverse to identity theft; where, "honest people impersonate big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them. Targets are leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else." (Lawless, 2005). Since they began in 1996, The Yes Men have impersonated some of the world's most powerful corporate and political figures, using satire and the power of mass media to draw attention to social justice issues. Their stunts take place in conferences, newspapers, on the Web, and on television; in some cases becoming bonafide media phenomena themselves.

This sense of the theatrical, and of the performance of media as an important mode of cultural criticism, also shows itself in contemporary examples of social media art. Writer Dylan Kerr describes the new practice as: "Born out of the '90s net art movement, [...] today's crop of social media artists work within the confines of the corporate-controlled social media sites that structure our daily lives in an effort to distort and question exactly those confines." (Kerr, 2017) As pervasive as social media has become in our daily lives, it isn't surprising that artists from Ai Wei Wei to Paolo Cirio have been compelled to question its inner workings and outward impact. Constant Dullaart's 2016 piece, titled *The Possibility of an Army*, is a particularly interesting critique of the artifice of social media engagements. Using automation tools on remote servers through thousands of proxies around the world, Dullaart created thousands of fictitious profiles on Facebook, using the real names of long-dead mercenaries who fought in the American Revolution (Schirn, 2016). By challenging Facebook's security measures, Dullaart's "fake army" draws attention to the platform's questionable policies, while discussing the social and economic value of our online identities.

e.g. [Ladymouth bot](https://adanewmedia.org/2019/02/issue15-ciston/) <https://adanewmedia.org/2019/02/issue15-ciston/> [feminist bot embedded in hostile spaces](#)

## **BUT DOES IT PLAY?**

Critics may discredit these interventions as ineffective, or even misguided. And indeed, expressive activism – as smart or spectacular as they may be – will never be able to 'solve' the problems of social media on their own. But to borrow from the discourse of tactical media, perhaps we can suggest a different line of questioning:

*"To ask of these projects 'Does it work?' would be to tap into such questions as, Has it raised public awareness and support? Has it affected government policy? Is there a tangible political outcome? However, to ask instead, Does it play? would be to tap into quite different sorts of questions—questions that point toward the creators or participants*

*and toward the users of the project, rather than toward the policymakers, governments, and corporations, which are the usual targets of contemporary activist interventions.”*  
(Mekle, 2008)

In this way, the focus is shifted from fixing some form of media, to critically and creatively changing the way you or I might engage with it. In the context of social media, this could mean expanding one's media literacy, or experimenting with new habits and intents. As authors Maddison and Scalmer point out in their book *Activist Wisdom* (2006), expressive activism can be especially effective in challenging public complacency.

This perspective, with its emphasis on the civic imagination, is in line with Mary Flanagan's method of 'critical play'. Writing about the intersection of game design, art and activism, she regards play spaces as an important site for the production and consumption of culture, community, language, work and leisure. As she puts it,

*“Play is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems.”* (2007, p. 262)

With this in mind, the lens of playculture can open up new possibilities in dealing with the pitfalls of shrinking social media spaces. First of all, it's interesting to note that online games have long been used by both free speech advocates and feminist digital activists as critical media. In China, multiplayer video games are already being used as “benign transport” for sensitive information, allowing players to bypass government firewalls and transmit data during gameplay (Griffiths, 2015). In terms of artistic interventions, the eminently popular *World of Warcraft* has proven fertile ground for a great many social experiments. Artist Angela Washko has spent years playing with and infiltrating its online community, performing projects which call to attention its sexist and supremacist tendencies. In 2012, she founded *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft*, in which she facilitates discussions with players inside the game about their attitudes to gender-based discrimination and how they respond to the term “feminism”. The project, she says, was born out of a personal desire to challenge the social culture of the game. “I had experienced sexual harassment, incredible condescension, general dismissal, and blatant favouritism, just for being a woman.” (Washko interviewed by Katzman, 2017) Over time, however, the work became more about facilitating a new forum for discussion and creating visibility for those who felt marginalized.

Gaming interventions like these offer valuable frameworks for embedding subversive, feminist activities in previously hostile spaces. From here, it is not difficult to imagine similar practices taking place in the massively multiplayer arena of Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Mechanisms

like role-playing, in-game quests and even the management of cooperative versus competitive actions, all lend themselves easily to becoming critiques of social media culture. In a country which is becoming more sensitive to dissent, the safe space of play may offer young netizens new and exciting possibilities for engaging with the limits of free expression online.

## **CONCLUSION**

\* Reiterate main points. Make the connection between current trends and past experiences of social and political censorship. End with a strong statement on the need to challenge the silence-makers on social media.

Word count: 9356

To cut: at least 1000 words

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