BOOK REVIEW

The Effect of Digital Development on Church and Society in Southeast Asia: A Survey

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Introduction: Southeast Asia Digital Landscape

Southeast Asia is a region of tremendous diversity in its religious, social, cultural, economic and political makeup. With a total population of over 657 million,[1] it is the third most populous geographical region in the world, only behind South and East Asia. Technological development in the region is also as varied as all the other dimensions of Southeast Asian life. Despite the fact that urbanization across the region still falls short of the half-way mark by less than a percentage point, Internet penetration has already reached nearly 60 percent[2] with double-digit growth in most segments and most countries of the region.[3] With over half of Southeast Asians being monthly active users, the region presents itself as the third-largest market globally, and the Internet economy is

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[1] "Southeast Asian Population," Worldometers, http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/south-eastern-asia-population/ (accessed October 7, 2018).

[2] "Internet Penetration by Region," We Are Social, https://wearesocial-net.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DIGITAL-IN-2018-003-INTERNET-PENETRATION-MAP-V1.00.png (accessed October 7, 2018).

[3] Atzlan Othman, "Facebook most popular social mediate platform in the Sultanate," Borneo Bulletin. https://borneobulletin.com.bn/facebook-most-popular-social-media-platform-in-the-sultanate/, (May 19, 2018).

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expected to reach $200 billion by 2025.[4]

Other statistics on Southeast Asian digital state are equally interesting. Southeast Asians top the world in terms of time spent on the Internet per day, overwhelmingly by way of the smartphone. According to GlobalWebIndex, users in Thailand spend more time on the Internet each day than any other country in the world, 9h38min. Philippines, another SEA country is only slightly behind with 9h29m. Indonesia and Malaysia rank 4th and 6th, respectively. Though slightly lower, Singapore and Vietnam, another one of SEA's most populous countries, also make the top 15. As we can see, the majority of the SEA countries are listed in the top 15 list of time spent per day online.[5]

No doubt a significant amount of online time is spent on social media, in which SEA has a 55 percent penetration. Brunei not only leads the region in Internet penetration, but also leads in social media penetration at 81 percent. Meanwhile, more than three quarters of Singaporeans are active monthly social media users. SE Asians use a variety of social media platforms depending on the country. While Facebook still maintains the lead in all 11 countries at the platform level, SE Asians also like to use mobile messengers. LINE is particularly popular in Thailand and Indonesia. Home-grown Zalo is widely used in Vietnam; and Viber was once so popular in the Philippines that Manila's transport authorities used it for their contact hotlines. Although Facebook Messenger has taken the lead in countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, other platforms with considerable use in the region include BBM (mostly in Indonesia), WhatsApp and WeChat. In Malaysia and Singapore, WhatsApp is still the most popular mobile

[4] John Russell, "Google: Southeast Asia's Internet economy is growing faster than expected," Tech Crunch, https://techcrunch.com/2017/12/12/google-southeast-asias-internet-economy-is-growing-faster-than-expected/ (accessed October 12, 2018).

[5] "Time Spent Per Day on the Internet," We Are Social, https://wearesocial-net.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DIGITAL-IN-2018-002-TIME-SPENT-ON-THE-INTERNET-V1.00.png (accessed October 7, 2018)

messenger on the market.[6]

Digital development is not even throughout the region. Although Brunei and Singapore enjoy high digital connectivity, less than one-third of the people in the three countries of Myanmar, Laos and Timor-Leste have Internet access. Likewise, only about a quarter of the people in Myanmar and Laos are social media users. The whole story, however, is that digital growth is rapid in all these countries. Laos, for example, saw an impressive 83 percent growth in users from January 2016 to January 2017. When the ban on Facebook was lifted in Myanmar, Internet users flocked to sign up for the platform. By 2016, there were nearly 10 million Facebook users in the country. Today, the number has grown to over 14 million.[7]

The highly complex picture of the digital landscape of Southeast Asia makes the study on the effect of the Internet on life in Southeast Asia not a simple task. Although certain broad strokes can be drawn about the region, closer examination reveals that the impact of Internet development on each country is unique to its particular context. This survey attempts to provide an overall picture of the effect of the Internet on Southeast Asian society with the caveat that observations made cannot be applied to each of the 11 countries in the region wholesale.

Internet's Impact on Christianity in Southeast Asia

The religious landscape in Southeast Asia is a tapestry of rich, diverse and vibrant age-old traditions. The religious makeup of the region reflects the result of centuries of political, economic, social and cultural exchange between the local people and those from East Asia, South Asia as well the West. Hinduism was introduced into Southeast

[6] "Digital in Southeast Asia in 2017," We Are Social, https://wearesocial.com/special-reports/digital-southeast-asia-2017 (accessed October 7, 2018).

[7] "Revealed: Facebook hate speech exploded in Myanmar during Rohinya crisis," The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/03/revealed-facebook-hate-speech-exploded-in-myanmar-during-rohingya-crisis (April 3, 2018).

Asia during the first century CE by Indian traders and became the state religion of several ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms, e.g. the Khmer Empire and the Champa Kingdom. Although Hinduism is no longer a widely practiced religion in Southeast Asia (with the exception of the Indonesian island of Bali), its influence upon the spiritual fabric of various populations in the region is readily visible. Hindu gods and religious festivals enjoy great popularity in Thailand where the predominant religion is Theravada Buddhism. The Theravada ambit of Buddhism is most widely practiced in Southeast Asia, specifically the countries of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In these countries, Buddhism, which arrived circa 500 CE, takes on local flavors by mixing with local traditions and beliefs such as in spirits and ghosts. Mahayana Buddhism is found predominantly in Vietnam as well as in other countries with sizeable populations of Chinese ethnic groups. Islam began to spread strongly in the 12th century after having initially arrived to the region around the 7th century. Today, it is the majority religion in Brunei (67%), Cocos Islands (80%), Indonesia (87.18%), and Malaysia (60.4%). In fact, Indonesia by country has the highest number of Muslims in the world. Christianity's arrival to Southeast Asia was much later compared to the other world religions, beginning only in the 16th century. With the exception of the Philippines and East Timor, which have 80% and 97% Catholic populations, respectively, Christianity makes up a tiny percentage in the rest of the region. Vietnam has a total Christian (Catholic and Protestant) population making up 8.2%, while Thailand's Christian population is less than 1 percent.[8]

Christianity as a small minority religion has faced tremendous challenges in Southeast Asia historically as well as in the present. Vietnam, for example, faced hundreds of years of persecution and continues to be strictly controlled by the ruling communist regime. Christianity has also faced great challenges in Myanmar where for many decades was ruled by a military government. There are also

reports of on-going persecution of Christians in addition to Muslims in this majority Buddhist country.[9] In countries where communication outlets are severely controlled by the state, it is not always easy to produce programs and materials for the purpose of evangelization. The development of technology, especially the Internet has helped a great deal in this respect.

The effort of the Catholic Church to evangelize through modern means of communication in Southeast Asia is seen notably in the creation of Radio Veritas Asia, which produces programming in various Asian languages from its base in the Philippines. By its name, it can be seen that at its inception, the program was a short-wave radio program broadcasted from the Philippines to countries such as Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia where the ability to produce Catholic programming faced great challenges. The Latin word "*Veritas*" means "truth" and represents the aim of the Catholic Church to proclaim the truth of Christ "from the housetops through the airwaves."[10] When RVA was inaugurated in 1970, the recently canonized Pope Paul VI declared that "this great enterprise and such an important work should echo the teachings of Christ and lift hearts to God's truth and love."[11] In 1981, Pope John Paul II characterized RVA as the "voice of Asian Christianity."[12] Indeed, the presence of radio broadcasts such as that of RVA was of tremendous benefit to countries facing severe persecutions. In 1990, Vietnamese bishops who went to Vatican to attend the Synod of Bishops testified that there were people in isolated villages in Vietnam's forests who knew about the Gospel without ever having met a priest.

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[8] "Religious demographics of Southeast Asia," World Atlas, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-demographics-of-southeast-asian-nations-dependent-territories.html (accessed October 7, 2018).

[9] Stoyan Zaimov, "Secret genocide of Christians reported in Myanmar: thousands killed, pregnant women raped," Christian Post Reporter, https://www.christianpost.com/news/secret-genocide-of-christians-reported-in-myanmar-thousands-killed-pregnant-women-raped-224688/ (June 6, 2018).

[10] "History," Radio Veritas Asia, http://www.rveritas-asia.org/index.php/about-us/history (accessed October 7, 2018).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

These people were known as "radio Christians."[13]

Despite the clarity of mission and vision, RVA cannot realize its aims in this digital age if it continues to hold on to old models of operation, both in content and method of transmission. The people in charge of the Vietnamese language programming for RVA recognized the need for change. In 2015, RVA Vietnamese began broadcasting its programs via the Internet 24/7 with a mix of news, Church teachings, biblical meditations, Mass, and sacred music. The streaming analytics indicate that in July 2015, the total number of listeners was 61,323. However, by January 2016, the number of listeners increased nearly five and a half times to 331,623. While most of the listeners lived in Vietnam, Internet technology made it possible for Vietnamese listeners from all over the world to access the program.[14]

Presently, despite the fact that the Catholic Church in Vietnam is unable to produce any television or radio programs that could be broadcasted to the public from within the country, the Internet is full of locally produced materials in various formats to serve the purpose of spiritual support and evangelization. Beside official diocesan websites and social media outlets that include news about the local and universal Church, video clips and live streaming of important celebrations, there are also those belonging to various religious congregations as well as Catholic movements. The Facebook group "Tin Mừng Cho Người Nghèo" (Good News for the Poor) has 281,000 followers. Thái Hà Parish Facebook Group (Truyền Thông Thái Hà – Thái Hà Social Communication) has over 120,000 followers. It is notable that these sites not only include purely religious content but also content that addresses social and political matters as they pertain to religion and justice and peace. In Vietnam, before local websites became widespread, one that

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[13] Alessandro De Carolis, "Radio evangelization and the new media," http://www.paoline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2012RADIO-ING.pdf (accessed October 15, 2018).

[14] Ta Anh Vu, "Challenges of the Digital World for the Church in Vietnam," *Religion and Social Communication* 13, no.2 (2015):188.

was created overseas, VietCatholic, had already been a popular resource for Vietnamese Catholic content for those living inside and outside of Vietnam. However, VietCatholic was often blocked in the country and access to the page required ways to bypass the firewall.

Thailand: The restrictions on the Catholic Church seen in Vietnam is not present in Thailand, which is a predominantly Buddhist country. The Thai Catholic Church, however is a minute percentage of the total population, making up only 0.5 percent. The Thai context, however, presents a different set of challenges. Although the Church can produce television and radio programs for broadcast on any of the commercial outlets available, producing programs, especially for television requires a big budget. Presently, only 3 weekly programs are aired, and some at rather unfavorable hours. Undoubtedly, these programs that take much effort to produce would find viewership not only at the time of their broadcast but also after they have been uploaded online. Like the television programs, Thai Catholic publications such as Udomsarn periodicals can also be found online in addition to the hardcopy.

For the Thai Church, due to the limitations in terms of reach of traditional Catholic communication resources, the Internet has been of tremendous value. Watcharee Kitsawat, who works at Thai Catholic Social Media, says the Internet is the "key" to receiving and sending information in all the various forms in an expedient manner to all people no matter their social or economic status. Kitsawat compares the speediness and the timeliness of the Internet to the work of the Holy Spirit whose presence can be made anywhere instantly.[15] Like Vietnam and elsewhere, Thailand also has its share of websites and social media outlets created by various Dioceses, religious congregations, and organizations etc. However, one of the most active Catholic Facebook groups is Khristang Thay Yok Mueu Khun! (Thai Catholics Raise Your Hands!), which has nearly 30,000 followers as of September 2018.

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[15] Personal interview via LINE application, 18 August 2018.

Although this may not sound like a very large number, it represents approximately 10 percent of the total Thai Catholic population. Many priests, religious and seminarians subscribe to this group along with lay people. As a public group, it is a combination of sharing news, photos, discussions etc. in a relatively non-restrictive manner. By following this group, one is almost certain to get quite a bit of information about what is going on in the local Church as well as some matters taking place abroad. New pages are also being created; however, membership often overlaps.

Family Relationships

There have been numerous studies about the effect of the Internet and social media on family relationships around the world (Hans 2004; Mesch 2006, Alolyan 2015; Abuiyada et al. 2016; Moawad et al. 2016; Sultana 2017; Valencia-Arias et al. 2017; Misaghi et al. 2018). Some of the issues raised in these studies such as its negative impact on relationships also apply to Southeast Asians. However, in this survey, I would like to highlight some matters that are particular to the Southeast Asian context.

In 2011, Microsoft conducted a poll on "families and technology" in Asian countries, including the Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.[16] This poll, which surveyed more than 3,000 people, attempted to find out how Asian families incorporated technology into their day-to-day cyber-relationships. According to MSN, the results of the poll showed that technology had become essential to the Asian family life, and that Asian families were enjoying communicating using technology. According to MSN, "Asian families are big believers that technology helps them to communicate better and it is obvious from the rate of adoption, that

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[16] "Microsoft study shows that Asian families are heavily into gadgets," Media Buzz, https://www.mediabuzz.com.sg/archive/2011/november/1420-microsoft-study-shows-that-asian-families-are-heavily-into-gadgets (November 2011).

everyone from young kids to grandparents is finding technology easier to use." Among respondents, 86 percent judged technology to have a positive impact on their family relationships, and 16 percent said that the impact was "very positive."

It is no coincidence that Internet technology has been viewed in overwhelmingly positive light by Southeast Asians. The people of this region have very tight knit family traditions. However, due to economic hardships, many are forced to migrate away from their home in order to make a living. Both internal and international migration are ubiquitous for Southeast Asia. In 2015, a survey conducted by the Philippine statistics Authority revealed that nearly 2.5 million Filipinos were working overseas.[17] In 2017 alone, 134,751 Vietnamese left their country as legal export workers.[18] The number who migrated to other countries to work illegally or under the pretense of tourism or studying abroad would add significantly to this total. Thailand is the receiving country of over 3 million workers from Myanmar—both documented and undocumented.[19] Compared with international migration, internal migration is much more numerous. In many Southeast Asian countries, there are various cultural and religious festivals where one could witness the exodus of people from the city to their homes in the countryside. For Vietnamese, this exodus takes place most dramatically during the Lunar New Year festival. For the Buddhist countries of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, the greatest exodus occurs during the Buddhist New Year Festival, known in Thailand as Songkran.

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[17] "How connectivity is changing the dynamics of the Filipino family," CNBC, https://www.cnbc.com/advertorial/2016/10/24/how-connectivity-is-changing-the-dynamics-of-the-filipino-family.html (October 24, 2016).

[18] "Xuất khẩu lao động đạt số lượng kỷ lục trong năm 2017" (Record number of export worker in 2017), Thời Báo Tài Chính Việt Nam, http://thoibaotaichinhvietnam.vn/pages/xa-hoi/2018-01-16/xuat-khau-lao-dong-dat-so-luong-ky-luc-trong-nam-2017-52751.aspx (January 16, 2018).

[19] Zarni Phyo, "Myanmar migrants in Thailand," Myanmar Times, https://www.mmtimes.com/in-pictures/19843-myanmar-migrants-in-thailand.html (October 6, 2018).

In many Southeast Asian villages, other than during these particular festivals where families reunite, it is often quiet. The inhabitants of the villages are mostly the elderly, younger students and children. Young people of college age move to the city to study. Those who do not study move away from the village in order to find work. Young couples who have children often leave them in the care of grandparents or older relatives, not seeing them for months or years at a time. Vietnamese who work illegally in Korea report not having been home for up to 10 years. Because they have made the huge and dangerous investment to make a living in the country, they try to stay for as long as they can in order to save up enough before going back to Vietnam.

In an era where economic migration has become a staple of the Southeast Asian family life, and long periods of separation is a reality for vast majority of Southeast Asian families, Internet technology has become and effective and inexpensive way for families to stay connected. The phenomenon of "transnational mothering" has become commonplace among Filipino women who work overseas (Parrenas 2005; Reyes 2007; Francisco 2011; Madianou and Miller 2011; Fresnoza-Flot 2018). Many work in Singapore, Hong Kong or Korea as domestic helpers, taking care of other people's households. At the same time, they also have their own family and children back in the Philippines that they must look after from afar. Thus, "transnational mothers" are migrant workers who attempt to perform their mothering tasks while working in other countries.[20] For these transnational mothers, the model of "intensive mothering" that includes nurturing, protecting, caring, and socializing cannot be carried out directly or with the same level but are partially handed over to other family members. The advancement of technology, however, has greatly assisted transnational mothers to undertake their roles rather than relying exclusively on relatives.

The technological gadget that transnational mothers rely most heavily on is the mobile phone with Internet connection. In my research, I interviewed over a dozen Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand who have children ages from 3-10 in Vietnam. Almost all of them left their children in the care of grandparents. All report that they call their children every day, even multiple times a day using Facebook Messenger or some other app that enables them to both see and hear each other. The mothers also report talking to the grandparents in order to follow up on their children. The smart phone has become an indispensable gadget for these mothers who can only see their children once or twice a year. Not only is the technology able to allow them to be connected with their children in a more efficient way, it is also inexpensive. Before the availability of these Internet applications, Vietnamese migrant workers wanting to contact their family had to buy phone cards in which the rate per minute was as high as 7 baht (.20 USD).[21]

Despite the tremendous opportunity that the Internet has given to transnational parents to connect with each other, limitations are inevitable. The great geographical distance between members could be reduced through voice and video streaming; however, in times of crisis or serious conflict taking place, not everything could be resolved online.[22] In addition, not everything within the parental responsibility could be easily carried out. Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand report leaving the task of faith formation for their children almost completely to grandparents. The grandparents take their children to church and teach them how to pray. When I asked whether they say prayers with their children online, most report no. The conversations mostly revolve around every day activities such as school and household chores. Some feel that because the quality of their spiritual life in Thailand is not as high as when they were still in Vietnam,

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[20] Arul Chib, Shelly Malik, Rajiv George Aricat, and Siti Zubeidah Kadir, "Migrant Mothering and Mobile Phones: Negotiations of Transnational Identity," *Mobile Media & Communication* 2, no. 1 (2014): 74.

[21] As high as the rate was using these phone cards, a direct call from Thailand to Vietnam would cost seven times as much.

[22] R. Wilding, "'Virtual' Intimacies? Families Communicating Across Transnational Contexts," *Global Networks* 6, no.2 (2016): 125-142.

that they could not educate their children as well in this respect as the grandparents. Most hope that things would sustain until they are able to save enough in order to return to Vietnam to be full-time mothers to their children.

Youth

The youth make up a large portion of the population in Southeast Asia. According to the World Economic Forum, more than half of ASEAN citizens are under 30 years of age.[23] The region is also the fastest in the world in adding new Internet users on a daily basis. Among the 124,000 new ASEAN Internet users added each day, the vast majority are youth. Although there have been many studies done on the topic of youth and the Internet in other parts of the world (Guan and Subrahmanyam 2009; Livingstone 2011; Dinesh 2015; Hasmujaj et al. 2015; VonHoltz et al. 2018; Ballaratto 2018), there have been few studies about Internet and youth in Southeast Asia. The studies that have been done focus more on developed countries such as Singapore (Mythily 2009; Skoric and Poor 2013; Loh et al. 2016) and Malaysia (Yusop and Sumari 2013; Baskaran et al. 2017; Ghazali et al. 2017). Studies focusing on lower income countries such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are much fewer. In many ways, the concerns about youth and the Internet in Southeast Asia mirror the concerns elsewhere in the world. However, there are points of departure when it comes to Southeast Asian youth as well. Based on examination of youth and the Internet in Southeast Asia, the following observations can be made:

1. **Widespread use of the Internet**. In Southeast Asia, the smart phone rather than TV is the most popular gadget in the house. It is the primary way that the youth receive information because approximately 90 percent of the region's Internet users are smartphone users.[24]

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[23] Hor Kimsay, "Youth keying into digital economy," The Phnom Phenh Post, https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/youth-keying-digital-economy (May 11, 2017).

[24] Rayna Hollander, "Southeast Asia could be a leader in mobile Internet

Whether on a mobile device or other gadgets, the Internet is increasingly becoming the medium in which Asian youth receive information. APAC Kids Market Insights Report 2016-2017 revealed that 98 percent of Thai youth chose the Internet over television as their source of information. This number is 81 percent for youth in the Philippines, 78 percent for Singaporean youth, 73 percent for Indonesian youth and 70 percent for Malaysian youth.[25] In this respect, even children as young as 6 years old are accessing information through the Internet. Once entering teenage years, only a few percentage of teens rely on other means beside the Internet for information. The dependence on the Internet for information has also affected the consumption habit of the region's youth. Increasingly, youth in Southeast Asia are asking their parents to buy things seen online rather than on television.

The widespread use of the Internet among the youth, however, presents specific challenges to the parents and grandparents in the region. There exists a digital divide between the parents and the children, and this divide is even more apparent when it comes to grandparents. Oftentimes, it is the young people who teach their parents and grandparents how to use the Internet rather than the other way around. When digital literacy among the adults is low, the ability to control how young people use the Internet and to protect them from the various dangers associated with Internet is also greatly compromised.[26] The fact that Southeast Asian youth access the Internet primarily through the smartphone means that they have almost complete freedom to go online in any manner they wish and wherever they want, and access

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usage next year," Business Insider, https://www.businessinsider.com/southeast-asia-could-be-a-leader-in-mobile-Internet-usage-next-year-2017-12 (December 13, 2017)

[25] Stella-maris Ewudolu, "Internet Rules When it Comes to Reaching Asia-Pacific Youth – Infographics," AEC News, https://aecnewstoday.com/2017/Internet-rules-when-it-comes-to-reaching-asia-pacific-youth/#axzz5RK7rmVkQ (April 27, 2017).

[26] "Going online in the Asia Pacific region: challenges for parents," London School of Economics, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2016/03/16/going-online-in-the-asia-pacific-region-challenges-for-parents/ (accessed October 7, 2018).

whatever they are interested in without much adult supervision. This is true especially among the youth who live with grandparents while their parents are working in other cities or countries.

2. **Optimism**. A recent survey conducted by the World Economic Forum on 64,000 ASEAN citizens showed that there is strong optimism, especially in the youth population that technology development will positively affect income and job prospects. 67 percent of under-35 Southeast Asians believed that technology will help them obtain higher incomes, while 52 percent felt that job availability will also increase with technology. The survey, which was conducted through various online platforms, received responses mainly from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and the Philippines. The level of optimism, however, varies by country as well as level of education. Compared to 31% of Singaporean youth expressing optimism that technology would increase jobs, 60% of Filipino youth felt that this would be the case. Respondents who held university degree or higher were also less optimistic (47 percent) compared to those who stated that they had no schooling (56 percent).[27]

Despite the attitude of optimism towards technological development, the prospects of increased job opportunities may not be as rosy as what the region's youth believe. The United Nations predict that in the next 15 years, the working age population will increase by 11,000 each day in Southeast Asia.[28] In April 2018, the Asian Development Bank released a report entitled "Asian Development Outlook (ADO 2018: How Technology Affects Jobs."[29] The report states that although technological development indeed fuels productivity, the automation of work will place many jobs at risk. Automation is increasingly being implemented in the apparel and footwear industries as well as in customer support. In developing economies in the region, some studies have asserted that over half of the jobs could be at risk. According to Justin Wood, the head of Asia Pacific and a member of the Executive Committee at the World Economic Forum, "Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies like artificial intelligence, advanced robotics and self-driving vehicles will bring significant disruption to the job market. No one knows yet what impact these technologies will have on jobs and salaries. Globally there is concern that technological change may bring rising inequality and joblessness. But in ASEAN, the sentiment seems to be much more positive."[30]

3. **Addiction**. The World Economic Forum survey also revealed that ASEAN youth spent an average of six hours and four minutes online every day, with 61 percent of the time for leisure, and 39% for work activities. Thai youth topped the list with an average of 7 hours and six minutes a day. The least time, spent by Vietnamese youth amounted to 5 hours and 10 minutes. The fact that young people spend a large part of their waking time online is worrying for health experts. Many in the field of mental health in Thailand expressed concern when in 2018, the government decided to officially recognize eSports, saying that it will lead to increase in addiction to online games. According to Teerarat Pantawee, head of the National Health Assembly's panel on children and media in Thailand, eSports is big business in the country, worth more than 10 billion baht and is growing at an annual rate of 12 percent. Thai children spend up to 35 hours a week online with more than half of that time playing games. It has been said that Thai children ages between 6 and 14 are so Internet tuned-in that it is the primary means of communication with this group.[31] According to Teerarat, official recognition of eSports can cause children to persuade their parents to let

[27] "Survey: ASEAN Youth Bullish about Impact of Technology on Jobs," World Economic Forum, https://www.weforum.org/press/2018/09/survey-asean-youth-bullish-about-impact-of-technology-on-jobs/ (September 11, 2018)

[28] "Youth optimistic about ASEAN 4.0," The Phnom Phenh Post, https://www.phnompenhpost.com/opinion/youth-optimistic-about-asean-40 (September 12, 2018).

[29] "Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2018: How Technology Affects Jobs," Asian Development Bank, https://www.adb.org/publications/asian-development-outlook-2018-how-technology-affects-jobs (April 2018).

[30] Ibid.

[31] Stella-maris Ewudolu, "Internet Rules When it Comes to Reaching Asia-Pacific Youth – Infographics,"

them spend even more time playing since it is now considered a sport. It is a sport, which if addicted, can lead to major problems physically and mentally.[32]

It is not only health experts in Thailand who are worried about Internet addiction among the youth. Experts in other Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore share the same concerns. Studies of Malaysian parents revealed that they were increasingly worried that their children's excessive use of the Internet was interfering with home and school responsibilities. Parents also expressed concern that online time was replacing important social activities.[33] According to child psychologist Norharlina Bahar, the prevalence of problematic Internet users in Malaysia could be as high as 49.2 percent. "Most spend time on online games and social media and there is enough evidence to show links to anxiety, depression, physical health problems, school disconnection, unemployment, decreased job productivity and social isolation." In Thailand, I have met numerous young Vietnamese migrant workers who confessed that the reason they dropped out of school and have to come to Thailand to work illegally is due to over-preoccupation with online games and not enough interest in school. In an exploratory study by Zhang et al (2017), it was found that Internet addiction among Vietnamese youth also brought on physical problems such as sleeping disorders.[34]

4. **Social aberrancy**. Rebellion is part of youth. This is generally accepted in the West. However, in Asian society where there is a relatively high degree of conformity to social norms, the presence of the Internet has exposed youth behavior that go against cultural

standards. On Vietnamese and Thai social media, it is not difficult to find clips of students, especially female junior high and high school students having catfights in which one girl is being physically injured while other students stand around watching and recording the incident. Oftentimes, beside the physical and verbal abuse, the victim is further humiliated by having her clothes ripped off. Although some young girls have their clothes ripped off forcefully, many are going online to voluntarily expose themselves for the sake of getting more "likes" from followers. In Vietnam, a youth trend on social media entitled "Saying is Doing" in which the user declares to take some outrageous action if he/she gets a certain number of likes has led to some serious consequences. In 2016, a 24 year-old Vietnamese man from Ho Chi Minh City went through with a promise to immolate himself and jump off a bridge if he received 40.000 likes.[35] Other users have promised and carried out actions such as posting nude photos of themselves, burning their school, eating their own feces, or even stabbing themselves with a knife.[36]

Other social aberrancies that were once confined to the physical world have also found their way onto cyberspace. Cyberbullying is prevalent in Southeast Asia as in any other region around the world. Cyberbullying can be carried out via messaging and chat apps, emails or on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.[37] In Singapore, a survey of teenagers revealed that 3 out of 4 said that they have been bullied online.[38] Almost all of the victims did not tell their

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[32] "Warning over child addiction to eSports," The Nation, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30354154 (September 11, 2018).

[33] "More Malaysians addicted to Internet," The Straights Times, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/more-malaysians-addicted-to-Internet (October 8, 2016).

[34] Melvyn W.B. Zhang et al., "Internet Addiction and Sleep Quality Among Vietnamese Youths," Asian Journal of Psychiatry 28 (March 2017): 15-20.

[35] "Cần giáo dục định hướng cho giới trẻ sử dụng mạng xã hội," Dan Tri, https://dantri.com.vn/dien-dan/can-giao-duc-dinh-huong-cho-gioi-tre-su-dung-mang-xa-hoi-20161109173355713.htm (November 9, 2016).

[36] Ngan Giang, "Giới trẻ câu like bằng trào lưu phản cảm 'Nói là làm'," Zing News, https://news.zing.vn/gioi-tre-cau-like-bang-trao-luu-phan-cam-noi-la-lam-post684312.html (September 24, 2016).

[37] Ruthaychonnee Sittichai and Peter K. Smith, "Bullying and Cyberbullying in Thailand: Coping Strategies and Relation to Age, Gender, Religion and Victim Status," Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research 7, no.1 (January 2018): 24.

[38] Derrik A. Paolo, "3 in 4 youngsters say they have been bullied online," Channel News Asia, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/3-in-4-

parents about their experience because they felt that their parents would either not understand or that the matter was too personal to share. The vast majority of those who experienced cyberbullying either personally or done to others did nothing about the matter. The vicious cycle of cyberbullying, however, makes a large number of teens both the victim and perpetrator. The survey revealed that 63 percent fit the profile of victim and bully.[39] Cyberbullying, however, is serious and warrants attention from social experts and lawmakers. In Western countries, this problem is increasingly being addressed with various resources and intervention programs. Sittichai and Smith say that this same level of intervention work aimed at youth, parents and schools has not been seen in Thailand, where cyberbullying has led to serious consequences including suicide.[40]

Social and Political Harmony in the Digital Era

In March 2016, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines released a statement denying any papal endorsement of candidates in national and local elections after a post on social media claiming Pope Francis had "admired" Rodrigo Duterte for his "honesty" went viral. The CBCP called on the public to "cease from maliciously using the Pope for political gains."[41] Nonetheless, using religion for political gains is far from uncommon in Southeast Asia. One of the most notorious cases took place in Indonesia in 2017 with the conviction of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) for blasphemy. Ahok, a Chinese-Indonesian Christian, was running for re-election as governor of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital city. Things were going well for the candidate until he decided to tell a small audience not to be fooled by those who cite the Qur'an that Muslims should not vote for a

non-Muslim to be their leader. Ahok's opponents seized the opportunity to attack him, uploading various doctored versions of excerpts of his speech onto social media, and called for charges to be brought against him. Several large demonstrations were organized, with the one taking place in December 2016 attended by an estimated 500,000 Muslim protesters, mostly men.[42] From a speech 6,000 seconds long, a mere 13-second clip was uploaded onto Youtube and other social media outlets; and even this out-of-context clip was hardly watched by those who felt that Ahok was guilty of blasphemy. One survey indicated that only 13 percent out of the 45 percent of respondents who thought Ahok was guilty had even seen the excerpt. In the end "mobocracy," as characterized by the Indonesian political magazine *Tempo*, prevailed, and Ahok was charged and convicted of blasphemy in May 2017.

Both of the incidents mentioned above to various extents illustrate the phenomenon of misinformation or fake news that has become a reality in the digital age. Southeast Asia has not been exempted from this phenomenon. According to a report released by Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, fake news spanning a wide spectrum of categories is more conspicuous and impactful because Internet technology with its numerous applications has made it much faster and less inexpensive to produce, circulate and re-circulate content. In addition, when there are no humans at work to propagate content, there are artificial intelligence agents set up to automate the task.[43] Even with sophisticated and systematic fact-checking mechanisms available in advanced countries, fending off fake news is still difficult. The challenge lies in the rapid dissemination of content and with such wide reach that information may have already been accessed by millions of people before it is discovered and verified to be fake news. If controlling fake news is challenging for advanced democratic countries, it proves to be that much more difficult for developing countries in Southeast Asia.

teens-singapore-cyberbullying-bullied-online-survey-10001480 (March 1, 2018).

[39] Ibid.

[40] Sittichai and Smith, 29-30.

[41] Aries Joseph Hegina, "CBCP: Pope Francis not endorsing Duterte," http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/776078/cbcp-pope-francis-not-endorsing-duterte (March 24, 2016).

[42] Ross Tapsell, "Post-truth politics in Southeast Asia," Inside Story, http://insidestory.org.au/post-truth-politics-in-southeast-asia/ (February 17, 2017).

[43] Gulizar Haciyakupoglu et al., *Countering Fake News: A Survey of Recent Global Initiatives* (Nanyang Technological University, 2017), 2

In these countries press institutions do not have strong or established mechanisms for fact-checking. In the case of Indonesia, for example, with its tremendous cultural, linguistic and geographical diversity, any effort to fact-check and correct false information proves to be a hugely difficult and costly endeavor.[44] This takes place in a context where Indonesia ranks fourth in the world in terms of number of social media users—behind only China, India and the United States. Three other ASEAN countries—Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand—are listed among the 15 countries with the highest number of social media users.[45] Southeast Asian countries have to contend with not only locally produced fake news, but also with content from overseas which makes it into the country appearing either in English or in a translated version. People may have some ability to fact-check things taking place locally, but news about other countries faraway is often digested wholesale without much consideration to its accuracy. Even stories that have already been fact-checked overseas and proven to be a hoax or a satire continue to have their own life in Asian countries. Fake news stories on social media portraying Muslims to be rampant criminals[46] or prone to terrorism can easily reach Asians, thus promoting and reinforcing the sentiment that Muslims are a violent and hateful people. It is not uncommon to hear Vietnamese people comment openly to one another both online and offline about how terrible Muslims are based on what they read in the news from overseas. It is notable that there are only about 90,000 Muslims, mostly from the Cham ethnic minority, living in Vietnam, making up a mere 0.1 per cent of the total population.[47]

[44] Kathleen Azali, "Fake News and Increased Persecution in Indonesia," *Perspective*, no. 61 (August 7, 2017): 7.

[45] "Number of social network users in selected countries in 2017 and 2022 (in millions)," Statistica, https://www.statista.com/statistics/278341/number-of-social-network-users-in-selected-countries/ (accessed October 7, 2018).

[46] Amy Sherman, "Misleading headline says 412 Michigan Muslims busted," http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2017/nov/21/freshmedianewscom/misleading-headline-says-412-michigan-muslims-bust/ (November 21, 2017).

[47] "Regards from Vietnamese Muslims," IHH, https://www.ihh.org.tr/en/news/regards-from-vietnamese-muslims-2262 (April 16, 2014).

Most Vietnamese Muslims reside in rural areas peacefully making their livelihood through farming, fishing and trade. Therefore, negative perceptions about Muslims among the Vietnamese do not come from any direct experience with the Muslims themselves, but partly from depictions about Muslims in Western media. This in turn affects how Vietnamese perceive Muslims that reside in their own country. As an Internet user named Nguyen Viet Ha Hanh commented on an online forum, "To a [sic] average Vietnamese person, Muslims are associated with terrorism." For Vietnamese who live in regions far from the Muslim ethnic minority, they are too small to be of concern to them. Muslims can live as they like "as long as you do not create any threat of instability and do not get in the way of 'our' way of life."[48] Although Vietnamese Muslims live peacefully in the country, the negative perceptions of Muslims and the fear that some might be radicalized would hinder the ability of Muslims to practice and develop their religious tradition in a country where religious freedom is already severely limited, and where Muslims are reported to be lacking physical, material and virtual opportunities to learn and preserve their religion. If content from overseas plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Muslims in Vietnam, it could be safely assumed to also be the case for other countries in the region such as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

Locally produced fake news as well as those coming from overseas are able to affect Southeast Asian society thanks largely to the reality of hyperconnectivity present in the world. In the digital age, the amount of global data produced is mind boggling. In 2016 alone, humanity produced the amount of information equaling all of human history up to the year 2015. For the next decade, it is said that information will double every two years.[49] Just Facebook alone is responsible for 510,000

[48] "What do Vietnamese think about Cham Muslims," Quora, https://www.quora.com/What-do-Vietnamese-think-about-Cham-Muslims (May 2, 2017).

[49] "Data is expected to double every two years for the next decade," Quartz, https://qz.com/472292/data-is-expected-to-double-every-two-years-for-the-next-decade/ (August 5, 2015).

comments, 293,000 statuses, and 136,000 photos per minute.[50] If this exponential rate of increase in knowledge presents a huge challenge for even the most developed countries to control and evaluate information, it is the more difficult for the less developed countries of Asia. The World Economic Forum warns that our hyperconnected world can suffer from "digital wildfires" due to "massive digital misinformation."[51] Just as American radio listeners jammed the police station telephone line in 1938 due to the radio broadcast of H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*, thinking that earth was being attacked by Martians, episodes of panic could take place in societies where the Internet is a relatively new medium and users are not yet savvy enough to make informed judgments on content. One could say that this had already taken place in the Ahok episode in Indonesia where 500,000 protesters turned out on the street of the nation's capital to protest based on a 13-second clip taken out of context from a 100-minute speech. This digital wildfire was started by Ahok's opponents and fueled by Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. The consequence of this digital fire is that a well-liked governor of Jakarta was convicted of and jailed for blasphemy, ethnic and religious tensions were inflamed, and others also became victims of the "Ahok effect."

Another wildfire that involved digital technology is the case of Ronhinya genocide in Myamar. In this once closed off country, Internet penetration galloped from 1 percent in 2012 to 26 percent in 2017. This explosion of Internet usage took place due to the plethora of cheap mobile phones in the country.[52] As the people increasingly took to cyberspace to engage in academic, social and political activities, individuals and groups also took advantage of the platform to incite ethnic and religious hatred among the people. After the ultranationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu was forbidden by Myanmar's government to preach in public in 2016 due to inflammatory speeches that helped fuel violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority, the monk took to Facebook. The narrative that Wirathu publicized on Facebook was of the Rohingyas as violent and aggressive outsiders. He characterized them as troublemakers and compared them to mad dogs. Proudly calling himself a "radical Buddhist," Wirathu declared, "You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog."[53] Despite such hateful speech, Facebook was not censoring the monk. Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch in Asia says, "Facebook is quick on taking down swastikas, but they don't get to Wirathu's hate speech where he's saying Muslims are dogs."[54] Wirathu also posted photos and videos of decaying bodies which he said are victims of Ronhingya attacks.[55] UN human rights experts in their investigation of the matter concluded that Facebook played a part in the Ronhingya genocide. The reason the social media platform was charged with this responsibility is because in Myanmar, Facebook is virtually synonymous with the Internet. Smart phones bought at the store usually come with the application already installed. Most of the users are familiar with Facebook but are not able to navigate the wider Internet.[56] As Facebook took steps to address the problem of hate speech in Myanmar by removing posts or restricting the monk's page at various times, Witharu found other ways to get around. He simply created a new account. Even if Facebook were able to restrict hate speech from this one particular monk, there were also

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[50] "The Top 20 Valuable Facebook Statistics – Updated September 2018," Zephoria, https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/ (accessed October 7, 2018).

[51] "Digital wildfire in a hyperconnected world," World Economic Forum, http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/ (accessed October 7, 2018).

[52] Aim Sinpeng, "Southeast Asian cyberspace: politics, censorhip, polarization," http://www.newmandala.org/southeast-asian-cyberspace-politics-censorship-polarisation/ (November 1, 2017).

[53] "Ashin Wirathu on comparing Rohingya Muslims to dogs in Myanmar," The Berkley Center, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/ashin-wirathu-on-comparing-rohingya-muslims-to-dogs-in-myanmar (accessed October 7, 2018).

[54] Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, "A war of words puts Facebook at the center of Myanmar's Rohingya crisis," The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-rohingya.html (October 27, 2017).

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

others. Even posts from official government accounts contained false or misleading information about the Rohingya crisis.

For all the dangers that the Internet presents towards social, religious and political harmony, in Southeast Asia, the technology has also empowered the people in unique ways. It must be acknowledged that the hope and expectation that the Internet would be a public sphere where people can come together on more equal footings in order to organize themselves and make more effective decisions concerning the entire society has not been realized in many respects. The hope that social media and social networking would achieve what the previous Internet applications were not able to do has also not been realized as clearly seen in the situations in Myanmar and Indonesia. However, one can also see that in certain contexts, the Internet has served as an outlet for greater political participation among the people.

In Thailand, studies have indicated that political engagement has traditionally been reserved for those in the upper rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Attitudes among political elites that ignored or belittled the opinions of the average people due to their lower status were also prevalent.[57] Although this general situation is still a reality in Thailand, the introduction and propagation of the Internet to the country has altered the dynamics. The Internet was first introduced into the country in 1987 at Prince of Songkla University and began to be commercialized in 1995. As Internet use became more widespread, one could see that it had a role in promoting civic engagement. Compared to their counterparts, Internet users were more likely to take steps to address issues regarding government officials or policies. A common way that this was done was by contacting the local media through online platforms provided by media organizations. Internet users were also more likely to galvanize themselves in order raise issues or sign petitions. The study by Meesuwan shows that the Internet does have

the potential to lessen the divide between the have and the have-nots in terms of civic engagement and political participation. In addition, the communication technology can potentially motivate users to be more politically active.

The availability of the Internet, especially social media in Vietnam has also brought dramatic changes to the political voice of the people in this country. According to Thiem Hai Bui,

> The rise of the Internet has led to social media increasingly playing a significant role in Vietnam's political life. It has been instrumental in giving elite politics in Vietnam and unprecedented level of visibility and exposure to the public. As such, social media has dramatically changed the landscape and scope of the public sphere in Vietnam. It has provided a new and powerful avenue for public opinion in Vietnam, along with a broader range of social activism, including social media and informal groups and individuals acting collectively on an issue-specific basis.[58]

In Vietnam, social media has presented itself as the formidable alternative to the mainstream state-controlled media. Social media is essentially the only effective means that the public can have access to important information free from state restriction and censorship. Despite the government's combination of repressive and responsive measures to control content coming from perceived or real opposition forces, cyber dissent has been on the rise in Vietnam. The platforms employed include blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, chatrooms, emails, mailing lists, instant messaging, and online forums. These vehicles have enabled the general public to voice their opinions, demand democratic rights and freedom of participation. There are

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[57] Sanyarat Meesuwan, "The Effect of Internet Use on Political Participation: Could the Internet Increase Political Participation in Thailand?" *IJAPS*12, no. 2 (2016): 59.

[58] Bui, Thiem Hai, "The Influence of Social Media in Vietnam's Elite Politics," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2016): 90.

an estimated 3 million personal blogs in Vietnam, and Facebook has become the most important and influential outlet of information. The majority of the accredited Vietnamese journalists also own Facebook accounts, and many write news based on what appears on Facebook. State media still controls the print, radio and television platforms. State media also is online; but in cyberspace, state media has to compete for the trust and interest of the audience, and it often finds itself on the losing end. Although the government still holds a monopoly over traditional media and employs it to direct public thought, it is not able to do so to the same level with the presence of social media. To be certain, the Vietnamese government has attempted several times to pass cybersecurity laws. In June 2018, Vietnam's National Assembly passed a cybersecurity bill requiring tech companies such as Google and Facebook to store all data of Vietnamese users within the country.[59] The law which went into effect on January 1, 2019 also stipulates that both foreign and local "owners of websites, portals, and social networks do not provide, post, or transmit any information that is propaganda against the Vietnamese government; instigates violent disturbances, disrupts security, or disturbs public order; contains humiliating or slanderous information; or contains fabricated or untrue information (in specified contexts)."[60] Platforms must comply when they are asked to take down content deemed as violating government policy, and companies must cooperate with Vietnamese authorities to provide information on their users when such users are investigated or deemed to have breached laws on cybersecurity.

The Vietnamese government passed the law despite widespread protest online and even street protests by people who saw this as

[59] Nguyen Dieu Tu Uyen and John Boudreau, "Vietnam parliament passes cyber law denounced in street protests," Bloomberg, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-12/vietnam-parliament-passes-cyber-law-denounced-in-street-protests (June 12, 2018).

[60] "Vietnam's controversial new cybersecurity law raises questions," Lexology, https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=d9c3ec0d-500c-4f6c-aed1-dfb0a20e1f62 (August 28, 2018).

unreasonable intrusion into civic freedom and free speech. Tech companies were also vocal in protesting the bill, but to no avail. Undoubtedly armed with this new cybersecurity law, the Vietnamese government is expected to continue to intensify its crackdown on bloggers and Facebook critics with lengthy prison sentences. Companies such as Facebook and Youtube will continue to be asked to remove accounts and videos by the Vietnamese government, an action that has seen compliance from the tech giants. Although the Internet and social media have certainly provided an effective outlet for the public to voice its opinions, one will have to wait to see how the newly adopted law on cybersecurity will affect the strength of this voice.

Recommendations

Based on the study carried out on the Internet, the Church and Society in the Southeast Asian context, the author has the following recommendations:

1. *Explore creative ways to employ the Internet and its many different applications for evangelization.* The Internet is the fastest, cheapest and most effective way for the Church to evangelize in countries where communication channels are highly controlled by the government. In countries like Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Catholic news and information is transmitted almost entirely via the Internet. Therefore, this platform needs to not only be utilized in order to effectively communicate accurate information by and about the Church, but also fight fake news and misinformation about the Church.

2. *Employ the Internet to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue and collaboration rather than division.* Those who oppose religions as well as religious extremists often use the Internet to create conflict among religions and cultures. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue must be carried out both offline and online in order to ensure interreligious and intercultural harmony and collaboration in Southeast Asia. As an extremely diverse region in terms of social, political, economic,

and religious make-up, this region stands to lose a lot if preventative as well as pro-active measures are not taken by the Church and other religions in order to promote healthy communication and mutual collaboration.

3. *Implement digital education to promote responsible and ethical use of the Internet, counter fake news and misinformation that denigrate the Church, promote interreligious and intercultural conflict.* Catholic educators, catechism program leaders, and other Church organizations need to develop instruction manuals that help teachers and parents to train young people about responsible use of the Internet.

4. *Create Internet literacy programs for parents, grandparents and other adult caregivers.* The digital divide is wide in the Southeast Asian context. Many adults are far behind the young people in terms of knowing about the Internet and its usage. A tremendous number of Southeast Asian youth is being cared for by older people who know very little about the Internet as well as the dangers it brings (cyberbullying, pornography, human trafficking, gambling, etc). Adult caregivers cannot provide healthy and wholesome upbringing for the young if they do not have adequate knowledge about the Internet.

5. *Advocate free and responsible use of the Internet.* Although the Internet presents many risks to social and religious harmony, it is a source of tremendous knowledge that the poor, oppressed and marginalized ought to have access. Church and national government must continually support efforts that promote right to information and religious freedom both online and offline.

Conclusion

This survey of the digital landscape of the Southeast Asia and the effect of digital technology on the Church and society in the region presents conflicting images. At the same time that the Internet has been a source of economic development in the region, there is also fear of job displacement due to automation of work that once relied on manual

labor. While Southeast Asians, especially the youth are very optimistic about the improvements in quality of life that digital technology brings to them, the downside of Internet addiction and other social ills have also been witnessed. At the same time that Internet technology has helped connected individuals, especially in the case of transnational parents, and small Catholic populations, to each other and the wider Church, it has also been a source of interreligious conflict and social division. At the same time that the Internet has enabled greater religious and social voice in countries where freedom of religion and speech are severely oppressed, the Internet has also served as a vehicle for fake news and misinformation that set off digital wildfires and create mistrust and disharmony among religions and peoples.

What is not disputed is that Southeast Asians have embraced Internet technology wholeheartedly despite the dangers that it brings. The Church and social leaders in Southeast Asia need to be very pro-active in order to take hold of the opportunities as well as address the dangers. The fact that Internet penetration in Southeast Asia at present is still significantly lower than in North America and Europe means that timely measures will help prevent negative impact of the technology on the Church and society when it does arrive to the rest of the people in the region. If religious and civil leaders are lackadaisical in their actions, the region will suffer increasing social and political strife, interreligious and interethnic conflict, and breakdown in the moral and religious fabric of society.