

The Big Picture for Digital Rights Framework: Bridging Academic Research and Grassroots Activism in Southeast Asia

Objectives

(What is the project? What are the effort's objectives? What primary questions are you trying to answer with this project?)

The Big Picture for Digital Rights (BPDR) Framework is a practical framework for the digital rights movement in Southeast Asia, for activists and interested publics to understand macro trends and issues connected to digital rights and the online civic space in the region. It seeks to bridge academic research and activism through understanding systemic causes and larger relationships from a strategic level, and communicating the findings in an accessible manner to support advocacy efforts.

The framework will draw from current academic ideas on the development of the Internet and its immediate and future impacts on society, focusing on the big picture with state and non-state actors. A deeper appreciation of systemic issues would enable digital rights activists to separate the signal from the noise, and navigate through the tangled network of different interests to protect human rights online. A longer term perspective will also enable the movement to form a vision, to be less reactive and more preemptive. Even though the BPDR framework will be built from global trends and theories and will have relevance beyond Southeast Asia, it focuses on the realities and challenges on this region because it is where the data will be collected from, and where the outputs will be disseminated to. Movements are ultimately rooted in the sociopolitical and cultural contexts that they exist in, and further testing of the framework outside of Southeast Asia may extend its usefulness to other regions.

The BPDR framework will be built and disseminated with two main parts. The first part is the building of the theoretical framework, which entails a deep dive into academic literature and interviews with experts (within and outside Southeast Asia) to organise and streamline trends and theories that are connected to digital rights and information control. The second part of the project focuses on studying the digital rights movement in Southeast Asia in order to understand the current scene, to identify gaps between research and practice, and to tailor recommendations and communication materials for activists in the region. The BPDR framework will undergo iterations as it goes through a spiral process of literature review and empirical observations. The framework would then inform the communication materials built for raising awareness on systemic issues affecting digital rights.

For the theoretical framework, the exploration will start from the field of communication studies, where Internet studies is situated – and extend to other fields such as economics, political science, and future studies. Big picture ideas are disparate and disconnected, which make them difficult to communicate in a coherent narrative. This part of the project aims to identify these ideas and find common threads and themes running through. Literature review will be supplemented by expert interviews identified from the scholarly community who will be able to provide specific recommendations for digital rights work. The questions that the theoretical framework will address are:

- What are the trends, theories, and academic debates that are relevant to digital rights work (in general, and in the context of Southeast Asia)?

- What are the common themes that run through these academic discussions? How can we connect them in a single framework for ease of understanding?
- What are practical recommendations coming from scholars for digital rights work?

The second part of the project, a study of the empirical situation on the ground, is key to making sure that the framework will be useful for digital rights activists within Southeast Asia. The research methodology proposed is a mix of participant observation and interviews with the community. The questions addressed are:

- Does the theoretical framework built relate to realities on the ground?
- What are the mindsets, culture, and challenges faced by the digital rights movement in Southeast Asia?
- What are the gaps between digital rights activism and current research on Internet freedom and information control?
- What would be the most effective way in disseminating the BPDR framework?

The linked concept note elaborates a bit more on “big picture ideas” and the background and context, and can be referred to if needed.

Milestones and Dates

The anticipated timeframe needed for the project is 12 months. As mentioned in the above section, there are two parts to the project: the first is to collect and organise big picture insights from the academia via literature review and interviews with academics, and the second is to understand the empirical situation on the ground in Southeast Asia, to tailor the theoretical framework for advocacy use in the region.

The research methodology will mainly focus on qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. It is anticipated that the first part of data collection of the project will rely mostly on expert interviews; the second part of the project will employ a mix of interviews and focus groups. Participant observation will be conducted in events related to digital rights, at local, regional, and international levels, such as COCONET 2 and 3, Internet Freedom Festival, Rightscon, and other events at the national level whenever possible. More information about the direction of the literature review can be found in the Supplementary Information attachment.

Preliminary organisation of the work plan is as follows:

Part 1: Building of the theoretical framework of the BPDR framework

- 2 months of literature review, refinement of research methodology, and planning for data collection (*Deliverables: Annotated bibliography, research framework, database of interview respondents*)
- 4 months of data collection (spiral process of expert interviews combined with continued literature review) and analysis for Stage 1 (*Deliverables: Report of findings, first version of the BPDR framework*)

Part 2: Tailoring of the BPDR framework for Southeast Asia

- 4 months of data collection and analysis for Stage 2 (*Deliverables: Report of findings, final version of the BPDR framework*)
- 1 month of design of communication materials for advocacy purposes (*Deliverables: communication materials, plan for dissemination*)
- 1 month of dissemination of the communication materials and wrapping up of study (*Deliverables: report on dissemination, research paper(s)*)

By the end of the year, I plan to complete at least one research paper to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal, based on the reports of findings. The paper(s) will be on the BPDR framework itself, and possibly also on the tailoring of the framework to Southeast Asia. The number of papers generated will depend on the richness of the findings and the diversity of perspectives gained. The one year fellowship will only cover the writing up of the paper(s), and pursuit of publication will happen outside the window of the fellowship. I will also aim to publish in journals that are not paywalled in general, and upload the working paper on pre-press and open access websites.

Anticipated outputs and outcomes

(Please be sure to include detail on the specific steps the applicant will take to ensure the project outcomes reach non-technical audiences)

The vision behind the project is to support the digital rights movement in Southeast Asia from the angle of strategic planning. Although it is unclear as yet how the BPDR framework would look like as the research has not been done, I envisage that the framework would feed into the thinking behind various levels and areas of work of digital rights organisations or CSOs that are interested to go into the area of digital rights. Possible uses of the framework include the following:

1. To form mid to long term strategies: An example of such planning is APC's strategic priority areas to guide its work between 2016-2019. Not all digital rights organisations have the capacity to generate strong and evidence-based foresight to form a long term strategy, and so a framework that lays out the big picture would be able to help them strategise their advocacy with longer term planning. Funders can also draw from the framework to decide on how to allocate resources to better effect certain outcomes.
2. To plan programme content: This refers to the conceptualisation of activities and events, for example the structuring of digital rights conferences (such as the one that was held by Suaram in Malaysia last year) or digital rights camps like COCONET, which requires the organisers to understand the landscape of digital rights to run an impactful event. Examples of programme conceptualisation include designing the thematic areas of panel discussions, deciding on the types of participants to invite, or choosing potential partners to work with.
3. To collaborate on issues: In this case, the framework can be a common ground or baseline that maps out salient issues, to help different parties orientate themselves within the bigger picture according to their strengths and interests. The framework can be a platform for bridging silos as collaborating organisations would be able to see where they stand amidst systemic connections and solutions.
4. To build further research: Organisations interested to delve further into specific aspects of digital rights can form research questions that are based on the theoretical framework that is already built.

The above are just some examples of how I think the framework can be employed potentially, without knowing the specifics of the framework yet. After the first stage of the project that builds the framework, the second stage of the project will zero in on the tailoring and the communication of the framework to the Southeast Asian context. The specifics of how to utilise the framework will become clearer by then, after which I can take various actions such as approaching funders or leaders of digital rights organisations to explain the framework, if that is what the findings indicate.

Some anticipated outcomes of the project are the following:

- Stronger strategic planning within the digital rights movement in Southeast Asia, shifting the model from reactive to proactive, with a systemic and longer term vision.
- Improved cohesion within the digital rights movement, in terms of the design of activities and programmes.
- More collaboration and networking among organisations working on digital rights

Some anticipated outputs are as follows:

- A framework addressing trends and theories connected to digital rights, including a set of recommendations drawn from scholarly work, tailored for the Southeast Asian context
- Empirical findings of digital rights work in Southeast Asia, and gaps between grassroots work and academic findings
- The draft(s) of at least one research paper based on the findings of the research
- Blog posts on the research progress and lessons learnt, updated every two weeks
- A communication strategy for the BPDR framework
- Communication materials that will draw from the BPDR framework, to be used for digital rights advocacy in Southeast Asia
- Workshops, lectures, and talks based on the findings of the research whenever possible

For non-technical audiences, I intend to document the research process in non-academic language in a series of blog articles, which would give a fortnightly update of the research progress and lessons learnt. The blog will also act as a platform for discussion and engagement with the community. The outcomes of the research will be shared in communication materials designed to be palatable to a non-academic audience. While I am not a designer, I am familiar with infographic tools such as Canva, and I would also be delighted to work with the Learning Lab of OTF to translate the research outcomes to accessible communication materials.

Tracking of the utilisation of communication materials as a form of monitoring and evaluation will be discussed with the host organisation, but can conceivably include the following:

- Page views and number of visitors to blog posts
- Monitoring of the social media accounts of partners to ensure that the materials are disseminated, with the engagement noted

- Statistics (of click throughs, for example) from the mailing list built to update stakeholders of the project

In what ways will this effort advance understanding in the relevant field?

(The response should demonstrate the applicant's understanding of the field including noting relevant existing research)

The bridging of research and advocacy on digital rights is one of the main contributions of this project. The gap between research and advocacy has serious consequences – academic research without application loses touch with reality, and advocacy without research becomes reactionary and is not based on longer term considerations. As highlighted by a 2018 study on research needs of the Internet freedom community published by the Internet Policy Observatory in the University of Pennsylvania, activists feel that academics fail to translate the relevance of their theoretical and descriptive work to the activist communities' need for action-oriented outcomes. The BPDR framework will draw from diverse literature and scholastic work, viewing them with the practical lens of advocacy and using them to support digital rights work on the ground. The process of bringing research insights to the grassroots level comes with the feedback loop of confirming or adjusting academic assumptions.

The Internet Policy Observatory study also confirms that research in the digital rights field is driven by the priorities of Western countries due to funding structures, and digital rights work in non-Western countries lack research support. There is limited research regarding digital rights movements in Southeast Asia, and most of the research on Internet freedom and information control focus on governments as perpetrators. The empirical study on grassroots digital rights work in the region will add to these limited bodies of research.

The BPDR framework is an important attempt to organise trends and theories shaping and affecting digital rights in a unified framework. Currently, there is no authoritative definition of digital rights, which leads to difficulties in operationalising the concept when doing research in the field. Under the umbrella term of “digital rights”, the array of issues covered often include freedom of expression online, data privacy and surveillance, access to the Internet, limits to content, and so on. The lack of definitional clarity will be addressed in my research as a prerequisite towards being able to identify and capture big picture ideas that affect digital rights.

The emphasis on interdisciplinarity will break the distinction between online and offline human rights that underline the work on digital rights, as digital rights is oftentimes referred to as “human rights online”. The BPDR framework will anchor digital rights onto offline realms such as sociopolitical, economic and cultural contexts, and also consider digital technology and rights alongside other technological advancements in areas such as biotechnology and nanotechnology, in order to achieve a systemic understanding of the wide implications of digital rights violations.

What risks or variables could jeopardise the outcomes of the project?

(Please also include information of how these risks or variables would be addressed or mitigated).

The risks that could jeopardise the outcomes of the project include the following:

- As the scope of “big picture ideas” is vague and spans across different disciplines, there is a risk that the literature review conducted may leave out important trends and theories that

would affect digital rights work. To mitigate this risk, guidance from experts is essential. I believe that the iterative approach of expert interviews and literature review will be important in reinforcing the rigor of the framework. To elaborate, the preliminary literature review will take two months, in which I dive into topics and subjects that I believe are relevant, to inform and refine the direction of the research and data collection. The subsequent four months will look at data collection and analysis, primarily through expert interviews. However, as I will invite the respondents to point me to literature that their views are based on, a spiral process is envisioned, in which expert interviews and further review of literature will be conducted in an iterative manner. As the goal is to build a robust and rigorous framework, the spiral process will be useful to preempt blind spots.

- There is a risk that the framework will not receive buy-in from the community, affecting the dissemination process of the communication materials. For this, engagement with the community has to start from early stages of the project, and I propose to do this through fortnightly blog posts which will build rapport and awareness of the project. Other ways to engage with the community include attendance to offline events such as the Internet Freedom Festival or RightsCon, to network face-to-face with members of the community. The dissemination of the project will also rely on the support and networks of EngageMedia (the proposed host of this project).
- As with any research project, accidental loss of data is a real risk. For this, I intend to back up the encrypted research data and my password manager within the cloud.

How will the applicant protect their safety and security and that of any others involved in the project? (if applicable)

(This should include a thorough explanation of how the applicant will approach digital and physical safety)

In my daily life I already use Protonmail and Signal for my communications. I have a Facebook account but do not have the Facebook or FB Messenger apps on my phone – I seldom check my account unless there is need to access a contact or a message that is sent to me. For Google apps I use them as needed when collaborating with others. All my passwords are electronically generated and kept within a password manager (KeePassX). For project purposes, I will use Jitsi for teleconferencing and Veracrypt to encrypt sensitive files such as the respondent database and the data collected. There will be little or no increase in risks on physical safety associated with the project.

What steps will the applicant take to minimise any ethical concerns associated with the proposed project? (if applicable)

The ethical concerns associated with the proposed project are minimal, considering that I will mostly be interviewing academics and activists about their work and broad opinions on digital rights, which should not jeopardise their professional or private lives. An informed consent form will be provided to all interview respondents to address issues such as anonymity and handling of personal data, and to inform them of their right to terminate the interview whenever they want.

How is the applicant well-equipped to carry out the technical work proposed (if applicable)

In terms of research capabilities, I am comfortable doing interdisciplinary work, as my academic and professional background has taken me through multiple fields, such as information systems engineering, public policy, communication studies, sustainable development, human rights, and

economics. I also have experience in advocacy and civil society work, which puts me in a good position to bridge research and advocacy.

The BPDR framework will build upon another research paper that I am working on now, tentatively titled “The Digital Rights Movement in Southeast Asia: Scope of work, Strategies, and Challenges”. This paper is commissioned by SHAPE-SEA (Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in ASEAN/Southeast Asia), a collaboration between two academic networks based in Southeast Asia (AUN-HRE and SEAHRN). The paper will be published in a book on the nexus between technology and human rights in Southeast Asia by the end of 2019. Here is a link to the call for concept note for more information: <http://shapesea.com/what-we-do/research/call-for-concept-note-deadline-28-february-2019/>

The SHAPE-SEA paper will already iron out certain issues that will be fundamental for the proposed project, such as some definitional clarity on the concept of digital rights, and a baseline understanding of the digital rights movement in Southeast Asia including the scope and focus of work, challenges faced, strategies employed, and the level of mainstreaming of digital rights in the rest of civil society. The Fellowship would provide a great opportunity to extend the study beyond academic research to tangible outcomes for advocacy on the ground in the region.

I have attached a preliminary draft/outline of this paper, containing information on the research questions, general structure, and methodology.

What other time commitments (if any) will the applicant have over the course of this project?

I am an independent researcher, working mostly on commissioned research and project bids. At the moment, my work schedule for 2020 is empty, as two of my ongoing research projects in 2019 are scheduled to finish by the end of the year. If I am awarded the fellowship, I will be able to focus full time on the proposed project.