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Living in Digital Asia: Better, faster, stronger?

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Amy Cheong might have been stupid, reckless, sleep-deprived, or just plain out of sorts when she [posted that infamously remark](#) on Facebook in October 2012, but it's hard to fathom that she might have even imagined that an online rant would cost her a job or that she might be fleeing Singapore within a matter of days.

The way in which the events quickly unfolded in this case – and several others – might shock and unnerve some. Perhaps they offer a rather extreme glimpse into life on the impulse, surrounded by

screens, media and gadgets and games; where comment has, never before, been this free; where regard for technology precedes that of the civility required for an open society.

Regardless of whether one might "like" or "unlike" such impact, the rate at which Asia is embracing technology is simply "amazing", according to Olivier Muehlstein, principal consultant at the Boston Consulting Group. He was speaking at a Singapore Management University (SMU) [Wee Kim Wee Centre](#) Public Talk, co-organised with the University of St. Gallen.

The session began with an infographic that fused Facebook usage with the world map – where bright spots indicate geographical areas where users of the popular social networking site live. "It's astounding how digitally engaged and active people are in this part of the world. Southeast Asia is extremely connected; it's an anomaly," he said, pointing to the large white smudge that is Asia.

A quick couple of straw polls around the room at this point revealed that everyone in the audience counts themselves as a regular Facebook user, logging on at least once a day. Almost everyone in the lecture room also happened to own a smart phone, a tablet, and many have performed transactions on these devices.

The sheer popularity of these mediums represents not just a vast amount of data and insights that would be so valuable for governments and businesses, but also implications that should not be neglected – because consumer behaviours are changing quickly, creating ripples across economies. To illustrate his point, Muehlstein raised an example: "The device has become the centre of everything that we do... We used to buy clothes in Orchard Road. We used to borrow books at the National Library. We used to buy travel tickets from agents." Yet, the way in which we go about some of these seemingly mundane tasks today, form the basis for many new industries and businesses.

Even communication styles have changed. Emails are becoming shorter, snappier and more instant-messaging-like; where it is sometimes unnecessary to start with a "hello", or to use punctuated sentences properly – if punctuation is even used. It has also become increasingly acceptable to "whatsapp" business associates, Muehlstein observed.

One important consequence from all of these changes, he added, is that privacy does not exist anymore. "If you want privacy, you might as well turn off all your devices now, because your devices know everything about you. They can pinpoint where you are exactly, who you call, what you text, who you text, who you contact most often, what you download, etc."

Another area to watch is, of course, the networks that fuel consumers' thirst for content and speed. The fact that people are spending a massive amount of time on mobile devices today has undoubtedly created headaches for telecommunications operators in Asia. Mobile gadgets are, for one, becoming cheaper and faster, and two, applications or "apps" are also increasingly capable of delivering rich content to such devices, provided there is a strong enough bandwidth.

Consumers today expect to have access to data anywhere, anytime, and on any device, said Muehlstein. This presents a problem for mobile companies in that they are quickly becoming somewhat like public utilities. He pointed out here that everyone's experience on their mobile devices will only become increasingly negative as overall usage intensifies.

"We watch movies, and browse more on these devices; and so data consumption is up. Bigger screens and higher resolutions require more data too. If you watch YouTube, for example, you're not just using more data; you're using more of your plan... the operator is not getting more money but usage is up," he said. "Telecom players must consider leveraging their core assets to build on longer-term digital services if they are to survive," he added.

It's important to pay attention to all of these behavioural changes, be it on the use of mobile phones, tablets or social media, as they not only signal areas where there might be potential for future business, but also, how to do business, Muehlstein added. Marketing strategies, for instance, cannot be the same between devices. "We already know that commercial potential is higher on tablets than on mobile. People spend more time on tablets, and the bigger screens allow more space for advertisements."

Asian businesses are responding to these broad changes in ways that are quite different from the West too. While companies are generally adopting more and more e-commerce competences – from full transaction-capable sites to static text and image sites – many traditional enterprises are indeed struggling to reconcile legacy with the new "Digital Asia", and Western examples might not always serve ready solutions for the region.

On the bright side, some innovation has come about because of such tensions, said Muehlstein, with some websites offering customers the ability to buy online and pay at a convenience store; some opting for an escrow, where money is placed with a third party until both parties meet the agreed requirement, and also payment models where the customer chooses online but pays at the point of delivery.

All in all, digital commerce and consumption in Asia is developing quite differently compared to the West. One reason, Muehlstein proposed, might be due to the fact that many markets in this region are "leapfrogging" to social media and mobile devices without having necessarily experienced Web 1.0 or desktop computing. Consumer behaviours on these mediums should thus be of greater importance to businesses that wish to succeed in Asia.

What does Muehlstein believe is an important issue to watch as "Digital Asia" becomes better, faster and stronger? "I'm surprised to see how easily people volunteer information online here," said Muehlstein. "Protecting digital personal identity is going to be a huge issue to watch. The highly educated are beginning to share less and less, but the management of digital identities is important and it needs to start now." Consumers, businesses and policymakers must look into this, he suggested.

Amy Cheong would agree.