



The Good Life

in Asia's
Digital 21st Century



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The suggested citation is:
Digital Asia Hub. (2016). *The Good Life in Asia's Digital 21st Century*.
Hong Kong.



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Contents

Foreword	vii
About this Book	ix
About the Digital Asia Hub	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii

I CONNECTING THE UNCONNECTED

Empowering the Marginalized: Tales of the Digital Good Life <i>Chinmayi Arun and Siddharth Manohar</i>	2
ICT4D: Empowering Transformation in Asia – Reaching the Unreached <i>Ritika Shekhar and Gaurav Shah</i>	8
Finally Plugged Into the Network: Technology That Is Changing Lives in India’s Slums <i>Abhimanyu Roy</i>	14
Securing Development For Everyone: Increasing the Efficiency of ICT4D Projects in India, Indonesia, and Malaysia <i>Harsh Ghildiyal</i>	22
Fueling the Affordable Smartphone Revolution in India <i>Anubha Sinha</i>	28

2 BEING ONLINE

Public Face vs. Private Face: Can It Hold in the Internet Age? <i>K.S. Park</i>	38
Creating the Self in the Digital Age: Young People and Mobile Social Media <i>Toshie Takahashi</i>	44
Why K-Pop Will Continue to Dominate Social Media: Jenkin’s Convergence Culture in Action <i>Raizel Liebler and Keidra Chaney</i>	51
Betting Across Borders: Mobile Networks and the Future of Gambling <i>Colin Agur</i>	58

Understanding Where Journalism Fits into the Smartphone Boom in India <i>Hasit Shah</i>	64
#CokeDrones and the Good Life: Migrant Workers in Singapore and the Politics of Recognition <i>Renyi Hong</i>	69

3 DIGITAL ECONOMY

The Seoul of the So-Called Sharing Economy <i>Emily Hong</i>	78
South Korea's Approach to 'Internet of Things' Technologies <i>Hemangi Gokhale</i>	84
The Battlefield and Hunting Ground of Online Marketing: The Ecology of Advertising and Copywriting in Weibo <i>Wan Man Tsz</i>	94
Bitcoin, Blockchain & Banking: The Next Best Thing for Development in Southeast Asia <i>Hauwa O. Otori</i>	99
Silicon Markets: Smart Hardware from The Streets <i>Anna Greenspan, Silvia Lindtner, and David Li</i>	106

4 GOVERNANCE, RIGHTS, AND POLICY

The Real Digital Divide in Southeast Asia <i>Pirongrong Ramasoota</i>	112
From Digital Divide to Language Divide: Language Inclusion for Asia's Next Billion <i>An Xiao Mina</i>	116
Parenting the Parents: State Paternalism Goes Extreme Online <i>Kelly Kha Yeun Kim</i>	122
Digital Rights in Australia's Asian Century: A Good Neighbour? <i>Angela Daly</i>	128
Digital Rights in the Court <i>Harris Chen</i>	137

5 ONWARD

The Power of Observation: Making Research Visible, Accessible, and Usable for the Asian Digital Economy <i>Julian Thomas and Amanda Lawrence</i>	144
Improving Informed Voting: Navigating Turbulent Hong Kong in the 21st Century <i>Christy Pik Sum Hui</i>	150
Songdo: South Korea's Connected City <i>Hyun Ju Park</i>	156
Little Digital Devices, Huge Recourses <i>Zhang Tianqi</i>	161
A Good Life in Asia with Robots? <i>Chihyung Jeon</i>	165

Improving Informed Voting: Navigating Turbulent Hong Kong in the 21st Century

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“**W**hat is a good life?” has long been a deliberated and debated question due to the broad and diverse scope of how “goodness” can be defined. As a pioneer in the study of human happiness, Aristotle believed that a good life is one spent in contemplation, exercising reason, and acquiring knowledge (Aristotle, 2004 ed.). The Latin word Veritas is the name given to the Roman virtue of truthfulness, which was also considered to depend upon adherence to truth by Augustine. Consistently, philosophy in the 12nd century shared the belief that the virtuous person led a good life. Veritas, being the mother of Virtues, was therefore the root of all virtue. It is thus an essential part of human well being guiding us towards a good life (Barnett, Whitby, Wong, Louzao, Reilly, & Denny, 2012). From the humanistic perspective that emphasizes value and agency of human beings, we have an obligation to make responsible and informed choices to help our lives and the lives of others go in a worthwhile and fulfilling direction. These views have informed historical understandings of the good life, but how are they changed by the digital paradigm?

Ironically, an information-rich environment that allows us free and unlimited access to resources does not necessarily give us knowledge and truth. Quite the contrary, we may constantly find ourselves battling against stern challenges associated with both access to and an excess of information in the age of information overload; it's both a blessing and a curse to be saturated with the amount of information we have today, which directly shapes our judgment in all aspects of our lives. This proliferation of information in the digital age has an acute impact on both public opinion and political participation. Due to the Internet's widespread political ramifications, the service has the potential to alter the conduct of civil society and spur democratization movements throughout Asia.

Voting is one of the direct means to political participation, which is fundamental to the health and development of democracy. However, candidate evaluation in elections can be a time-consuming and labor-intensive process, and the arduous nature of this process alone can sometimes discourage citizens' from voting (Aldrich, 1993). This problem is compounded by a number of factors. First, people struggle to allocate the time required to properly gather and process information on the election and candidates. Second, the traditional source for election and candidate information – print media and television – are losing relevance in the digital age. Third, online media may contain misinformation and, even if it does not, such information does not directly encourage civic participation. Fourth, the availability of official information – in the form of officially sanctioned advertising materials or candidates' prior public service and voting records – are scattered, unorganized, and only accessible to the most determined enquirer. As a result, it's difficult for the average voter to make a truly informed and responsible voting decision that is based on objective information. Decisions are instead frequently based on proxies such as party logos, media portraits, and sometimes misinformation (O'Shaughnessy, 2001). This is not conducive to the health of democratic development and good governance.

In hopes of nurturing the development of Hong Kong politics, local media literacy company Lite Up Project has been called upon to create means for efficient access to accurate political information for Hong Kong citizens, in order to shed light on issues of governance and civil participation in a deeper way. This essay will explore the potential of opening up the space for cross-ideological discussion between friends and families across the political spectrum, and fostering a culture of voting through development of a voting decision-making application in Hong Kong.

The VAA (voting advice application) made its first appearance in Europe in 1998 (Fivaz, 2010). Since then, the tool has significantly improved the accessibility of electoral information (Alvarez, Levin, Trechsel, & Vassil, 2014). By using a blind questionnaire and matching users' opinions to party policies, VAA provides voters with an informative overview and candidate matching to help voters decide whom to vote for in local elections. This function makes candidate comparison easier and information more accessible for voters. There are many examples of VAA across the globe, predominantly in North America and Europe. Some of these examples, such as Vote Compass and Kieskompas, have been successful in terms of penetration: the most popular VAA in Germany, WahlO-Mat, got used over 13 million times before the German federal election of 2013 (Garzia & Marschall, 2014). Similarly, over 40% of the electorate used Valkompassen prior to the 2014 elections in Sweden (Lindstedt & Eliasson, 2006). All of these apps aim to help voters understand where their policy and political positions stand in relation to those of candidates and parties. Most of these follow the questionnaire and algorithm approach and present voter compatibility scores for each candidate.

Despite its steady growing popularity in Western countries, VAA attracted little to no attention in Asia, including Eastern Asia, home to a number of consolidated democracies including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Larry Diamond (2012) said if a new regional wave of transitions to democracy unfolds in the next five to ten years, it is more likely to come from East Asia, including China (Diamond, 2012). Therefore, introducing VAA in Hong Kong has a lot of attractive potentials. As a special administrative region of China, Hong Kong enjoys a “high degree of autonomy” (Basic Law, Article 2, 1990) that ensures an independent legal system, robust civil liberties, free speech, and free press. These established institutions substantiate the foundation for democracy to foster in Hong Kong. Over the past, Hong Kong has served as China’s window to the world in the past centuries. Given its unique, comprehensive and integrated body of history and knowledge, Hong Kong will continue to play a leading role in exchanges between the East and West and bring meaningful impact on the mode of modernization of China and East Asian societies.

Similar to many democratic systems around the world, Hong Kong has a multiparty system with a legislative body of 70 legislative seats representing 14 Cadre type parties and a few independent seats (Registration and Electoral Office, 2012). Parties are divided ideologically (left - pro-welfare and pro-reform vs. right - pro-business and pro-status quo; liberal vs. conservative), each of which without the prospect of grasping dominant political power to govern Hong Kong. Of the 70 seats, there are only 40 directly elected seats (35 are elected from five districts throughout Hong Kong based on proportional representation; the other five super seats are elected Hong Kong wide) (Electoral Affairs Commission, 2012). In other words, voters are given two votes on the ballot in Legislative council elections; one geographical vote and one "super" vote. This electoral process and resulting multiparty system are vital to the consolidation of representative democracy because it ensures party and candidate competition. At the same time, the legislative branch ensures responsible governance as it oversees, scrutinizes, and passes the actions and bills of the executive branch of the government. In recent years, the debates concerning Hong Kong’s Chief Executive electoral reform have created a lot of tension within the society (Huntsman, 2014). On September 28th of 2014, an Umbrella Movement broke out in Hong Kong, bringing thousands of mostly young people to engage in a 79-day street occupation (Huntsman, 2014). Among a number of different political issues, the loudest call was for the freedom to elect Hong Kong’s chief executive without a preliminary selection process based on the decision made by Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) (Huntsman, 2014). This protest is a practical example of the high public frustration and societal instability in Hong Kong. As it was known as a student-led event, it was evident that political parties even the pan-democratic parties were marginalized throughout the event. Looking ahead, approximately 326000 young people will become eligible to cast their first votes in 2015, therefore, it is imperative to rebuild the confidence in parties, elections, and the government during this critical time.

As the founder of Lite Up Project, I traveled to Bern, Switzerland, and met with founder of Smartvote over the summer of 2015 shortly before elections began. This meeting provided me with insight into VAA's direction that allowed me to produce a similar technology in Hong Kong. This application will be entirely based on smartphone apps, for Hong Kong has one of the highest smartphone penetration rates ranking third highest (74%) in the world (Google Consumer Barometer, 2014). Figures of Google's Consumer Barometer report (2014) also indicate relatively mature and pervasive use of smartphones in Hong Kong, and this is a sufficient condition for election campaigning to occur through smartphones (Google Consumer Barometer, 2014). As smartphones are at the side of voters during most of their waking hours, users can access the app at any time they choose. Inspired by Smartvote, our platform INVO covers all five geographic districts of Hong Kong and shows users how their views align with those of the candidates running for election by taking a quiz. After its launch in 2016, INVO aims to motivate voters to engage in further research about party policies to help them mitigate biases associated with the "packaged" or portrayed images of candidates by opinionated media or appealing sound bites; they can instead direct voters' attention to substantive sources that are unbiased. The questions presented by INVO will gauge a voter's position on various policy issues, as well as where he or she stands within the political spectrum. An algorithm will compute the voter's policy and political compatibility with each candidate's stated positions. INVO does not recommend which candidate a voter should select per se, but instead compares the voter's position with those of all candidates and enables him/her to explore each of them further. By making accessing information through the app fun and interactive and sharing easy on social media, INVO can promote public awareness of candidates' and parties' platforms at a substantive level and, in effect, INVO can stimulate healthy public and public discussion among users. In fact, social influence can be a powerful driving force for social engagement and voter mobilization (Rolf, 2012). Due to INVO's means of disseminating information, we expect voters in future Hong Kong elections to turn out in greater numbers and to do so with a greater understanding of the issues. This all-in-one information-sharing platform could potentially transform Hong Kong political norms of participation in general, especially in stimulating cross-ideological discussion and establishing voting habits for first-time voters.

The key to INVO's success will be its algorithm design and the process of identifying responses with particular candidates' views and positions. It can be a challenging process to get all political parties involved; yet this process ensures that the app generates fully transparent and accurate results. Like similar applications that exist in other countries, the process of identifying questionnaire responses with candidates' views and positions is performed by a panel of trained and credible professionals. The questionnaire will be drafted to identify the voter's position on a broad range of policy issues by assigning different point values to each multiple choice answer on how strongly they feel about each issue. The panel will study all candidates' information to estimate

how they would respond to the same questionnaire, and then take these predictions to each candidate and party for confirmation and fine-tuning. Through this rigorous process, INVO will have a reliable questionnaire that will be able to correctly match voters' policy and political positions with those of candidates and their parties.

In addition to INVO's primary matching function, the application will have other features that include: (1) a comprehensive profile of each candidate that contains his or her previous public service record, (2) each candidates' party affiliations and political views, (3) location of polling places where the voters can cast their ballots, and (4) historical tracking of changes in the user's political ideology over time. By collecting anonymized data, a database within the application can track changes in public opinion among users. This information, which can be further broken down by region, can be shared with legislators to assist in better future public policy formulation and with news organizations to spur public debate. By doing so, INVO can be an effective tool to create reports that show the overall opinion and demographics of that region's political status. This will help policy makers to design better and more suitable policy initiatives for each region. The data resources could also create and raise interesting topics for news and conversation in debates. Such a shift in public discourse in the digital space could be useful in bringing the political system forward in Hong Kong by encouraging the transformation of public aspirations into real and constructive policies.

Our physical and digital worlds are merging with technology; the experiences we share online and offline are becoming inseparable to our life and wellbeing. These worlds will eventually become mixed, inhabiting all of us as global citizens. As our world connects and expands, new challenges and risks will arise and require us to constantly make complicated choices. We believe that knowledge gives us power to cope with these challenges by opening our eyes to new perspectives through our interaction with others and learning from the information we share, both online and offline. This power gives us the ability to make informed choices including whom we choose to represent us. A sum of all our good choices as informed citizen leads us to a good life, in both the real and digital realms.

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