

‘Come and get me’: a radical response to hegemonic authoritarian rule

Cherian George

Associate Professor, Division of Journalism and Publishing, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information, Nanyang Technological University

Analyses of online activity in authoritarian societies have focused mainly on the use of cyberspace as a kind of safe house for political insurgents. Initial euphoria about the emancipatory power of the internet was muted by the realisation that governments could master the technology and engage in online surveillance and counter-insurgency. But, while the level of optimism about the internet's potential ebbs and flows, the lens through which such activity is viewed has not changed. It is framed primarily as a cat-and-mouse game in which dissidents engage in guerrilla-style hit-and-run communication while trying to evade capture by authoritarian governments. Certainly, this remains an important dynamic and deserves continued study. However, drawing on research in Singapore, this paper focuses on a radically different use: as a medium for civil disobedience, with activists deliberately remaining within physical reach of the police. Instead of seeking anonymity or extra-territoriality, they may even invite arrest. To make sense of such activity, internet scholars need to refine their understanding of authoritarian systems and the patterns of resistance within them. Hegemonic regimes such as Singapore's try to consolidate themselves by gradually substituting of overt coercion with seeming consent. Every act of direct censorship has the potential to undermine this process of consolidation. In a corporatist press system, direct censorship is replaced by self-censorship, making it difficult for even journalists to detect where independent editorial judgment ends and government intervention begins. Therefore, one radical application of the internet in Singapore has been to circumvent the gatekeepers of the establishment media and engage in public acts of defiance that provoke visible coercion. In the eyes of these activists, getting caught need not represent failure; it is a potentially a rewarding tactic in a strategy of counter-hegemony.