

Social Issue Films in the Asia-Pacific

Cinemata

ENGAGEMEDIA launched Cinemata in 2021 as a video platform for social issue films about the Asia-Pacific. With over six thousand six hundred user-contributed films from more than thirty countries, Cinemata aims to bring to the forefront critical but often overlooked narratives about pressing issues in the region, such as climate change, conflict, freedom of speech, gender and sexuality, and food security.

EngageMedia is a nonprofit organization that promotes digital rights, open and secure technology, and social issue documentary. Combining video, technology, knowledge, and networks, EngageMedia supports Asia-Pacific and global changemakers advocating for human rights, democracy, and the environment. In collaboration with diverse networks and communities, EngageMedia defends and advances digital rights.

Why “Cinemata”?

“Cinemata” combines “cine” (motion picture), and “mata” (eye in various regional languages reflecting a regional perspective and commitment to seeing and understanding social realities:

- Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa Indonesia, and Filipino: *mata*
- Tetum (East Timor): *matan*
- Vietnamese: *mắt*
- Thai and Lao: *ta*.

This name reflects Cinemata’s vision: connecting films, issues, and filmmakers across the Asia-Pacific through a collective lens.

Upload and Download of Films

Cinemata allows filmmakers and contributors to upload their films of any genre at any time, provided they meet the platform’s editorial guidelines.

The platform supports a wide range of formats, from h264 and h265 to professional codecs like Apple ProRes and Avid DNxHS, and offers transcoded versions from 240p to 1080p for easy accessibility and sharing.

Film downloads are only enabled with the consent of the uploader. Users can also organize content using the Playlist Feature, enabling classroom use, community screenings, or tailored educational experiences. Video links can be embedded in websites, expanding visibility and reach.

Editorial Policy and Curatorial Approach

Cinemata serves as a platform for essential yet underheard stories, fostering greater reach, engagement, and impact for filmmakers, helping audiences discover thought-provoking videos. It welcomes various styles ranging from documentary, fiction, animation and experimental. Cinemata features and promotes videos that:

- are well-produced, innovative, engaging, and entertaining
- are produced by the communities directly affected by the video, or at the very least include their perspectives
- are connected to civil society and other social actors
- aim to create change, or are solutions-driven
- promote critical thinking, questions, and conversations, as well as respect freedom of expression, differing opinions, and viewpoints
- are open-minded and explore innovative ideas and approaches to problems
- promote underheard voices and perspectives.

At the same time, Cinemata does not accept films that promote discrimination, misinformation, violate privacy, or show disrespect toward the dignity of subjects.

Creative Commons and Open Content

Cinemata supports open content through Creative Commons licensing, encouraging sharing for advocacy, education, and community use. Filmmakers can select their preferred licensing terms when uploading. This approach ensures vital stories are accessible to those working to build a more just and informed region.

The Cinemata Curatorial Team and Community Building

Cinemata is more than a video platform. It is a growing community of socially engaged filmmakers and film practitioners, human rights advocates, educators, and technologists. The Cinemata team supports the community through:

- **Featured Films:** Weekly spotlighting of significant videos, promoted across the platform and social media;
- **Outreach and Collaboration:** Partnerships with filmmakers, civil society organizations (CSOs), educators, and festival organizers;
- **Screenings and Dialogues:** Both virtual and in-person screenings with post-viewing discussions;
- **Curated Collections:** Film playlists focused on relevant social and environmental issues in the region;
- **Users are also empowered to create their own curated playlists for advocacy, education, or community use.**

New Initiatives: Expanding Cinemata's Impact

To further its mission, Cinemata launched key initiatives that deepen its engagement with filmmakers and the broader advocacy and tech communities:

1. Cinemata Community Curators Residency Program

Launched in 2025, this program supports Asia-Pacific curators in developing thematic film programs such as those addressing civic space, gender justice, environmental justice, human rights issues, and more. Each residency involves curating a film program, organizing screenings and talkback sessions, and developing advocacy resources. This initiative strengthens local curatorial leadership and highlights underrepresented regional narratives.

2. Cinemata CMS: An Open-Source Platform for Human Rights Film Hosting

To strengthen the long-term sustainability and adaptability of the platform, EngageMedia is developing CinemataCMS, an open-source video content management system designed to support the hosting and curation of human rights and social issue films in the Asia-Pacific. CinemataCMS builds on the lessons of the existing Cinemata.org platform, offering a flex-

ible, transparent and locally adaptable alternative to commercial video platforms.

Developed in collaboration with Southeast Asia-based developers, CinemataCMS is now open to contributions from the broader tech community, particularly those working in the free and open-source software (FOSS) space. The project invites developers, designers and collaborators interested in human rights and social impact technology to help improve the system. A growing community of contributors is already working to enhance features such as film uploading, playlist creation, metadata tagging, moderation tools and Application Programming Interface (API) integration.

Built using Django and React, CinemataCMS supports multi-language film metadata, robust access control, and customizable editorial workflows, allowing film programmers and filmmakers to manage their own collections or set up independent film hubs.

Interested contributors can learn more and get involved via the project's GitHub repository: <https://github.com/EngageMedia-video/cinematacms>.

Cinemata Currents

Cinemata launched Cinemata Currents 2025 on 5–8 June 2025, with pre-view screenings on 2 June 2025. Cinemata Currents is a hybrid film festival spotlighting films from and about Southeast Asia that interrogate, reclaim and reimagine civic spaces. While Cinemata continues to highlight stories from across the broader Asia-Pacific region, this festival edition centers on the urgent struggles, resistances and solidarities emerging from Southeast Asian contexts.

The 2025 edition was curated by Aghniadi from Indonesia and Patrick F. Campos from the Philippines, two film programmers and cultural workers whose practices lie at the intersection of cinema, advocacy and regional solidarity. Both curators were part of the first batch of Cinemata Community Curators Residency Program that supports curators in developing regional film programs on human rights, environmental justice and civic engagement.

Film Programming as a Mode of Intervention

As an advocacy-driven initiative, Cinemata Currents does not just present films—it creates a participatory space where audiences, filmmakers, and ad-

vocates can actively engage with one another. Through interactive and community screenings, real-time discussions with civil society organizations, and a digital campaign, the festival aims to transform film programming into an act of shared meaning-making.

Cinemata Currents highlights organized social movements as well as micro-resistances—the ways in which marginalized groups assert their presence in historic moments and daily life, whether through non-governmental networking, community organizing, or documenting their lived experiences. However, rather than flattening these narratives into a single framework, Cinemata Currents emphasizes the nuances of diverse practices, places and issues—understanding that while themes of displacement, marginalization and erasure may resonate across regions, the specific conditions, responses and stakes differ. By centering these complexities, Cinemata's programs foster a deeper engagement with how civic spaces are contested, reclaimed and reimagined across the Asia-Pacific. Central to this approach is Cinemata's decades-long, extensive archive of thousands of audiovisual materials—a collection built collaboratively with a wide range of civil society actors in the region.

Through a constellation of curated screening sets, Cinemata Currents illuminates the manifold ways in which minor cinemas articulate the lived experiences of those who exist at the peripheries of dominant power structures and majority populations, foregrounding the political tactics, cultural expressions and theoretical reworldings represented in and enacted through moving-image practices and works. By fostering discussions with individuals whose lives connect with, intersect with, and are represented in the films, Cinemata Currents acknowledges the multifaceted nature of images: simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the intervening act of movement and moviemaking.

Translocal Thematics of the Minor

This inaugural festival iteration was organized into four segments, each revealing a thematic praxis of the minor that frustrates the unquestioned status quo.

This festival responds to the question: For what is power but erasure disguised as order?

Minority Counterpublics

The festival interrogates moving images as a site of de- and reterritorialization, where the margins do not plead for inclusion but instead dispute the center's claim to universality and the myth of national cultural homogeneity. In this segment, films document not only acts of preservation but also the evolution of cultural practices that refuse the pressures of reductive categorizations, involuntary assimilation and systemic exclusion.

Displacement and Countermovement

In a kind of inversion, films about displacement gain resonance when viewed from multiple locations. The online platform mirrors the condition of exile—present yet imprecisely located. Moreover, this segment captures the precarious situations of migrants, refugees and those crisscrossing borders while focusing on solidarity networks and cultural acts that reconstitute civic spaces.

Indigeneity and Sovereignty

The films in this segment preserve and reactivate Indigenous knowledge against the logics of empire, capital and military power. They explore land politics and environmental issues, positioning Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies as potent counter-discourses to extractive paradigms.

Feminist and Queer Subjectivities

In societies where LGBTQIA+ identities and feminist movements are criminalized or suppressed, minor cinema forges networks of care, traces vital new kinships, and offers resources for self-definition. This set unveils doubly marginalized subjects and celebrates them through luminous films in the interstices of personal suffering.

As these thematics demonstrate, speaking from the region's diverse margins is not seeking assimilation but inhabiting multiplicity. For those deemed "minor," cinema becomes both rupture and solace—a breath that disrupts silence and resonates in the spaces between. The personal and political dissolve into one another; the everyday reveals itself as insurgent.

Ultimately, minor cinema claims no dominion but unsettles. In its articulation lies reclamation—not merely of territory, but of presence. To witness, to be witnessed—not as Other, but as selves in flux—is a refusal to vanish, a refusal to be contained.

As a continuation of Cinemata Currents 2025, EngageMedia released *Mapping the Currents: A Manual for Community-Centered Cinema*, a practical guide for civil society organizations, independent film spaces, video collectives, educational institutions, and other changemakers interested in mounting film initiatives grounded in civic dialogue and community engagement.

Tech Tales Youth¹

Tech Tales Youth is an EngageMedia initiative supporting young filmmakers in creating compelling stories about digital rights while building advocacy campaigns for safer digital spaces. Building on successful editions in Thailand and the Philippines, this latest collection brings urgent stories from Malaysia and Bangladesh, where emerging filmmakers shine a light on pressing digital rights challenges in their local contexts. The films serve as crucial tools for awareness-raising and advocacy, inspiring audiences to take action and support local digital rights initiatives.

Tech Tales Youth's latest film collection, showcasing powerful stories about digital rights from Malaysia and Bangladesh, launched with compelling premieres highlighting the urgent need for youth-led digital rights advocacy in Southeast Asia. The premieres revealed strong demand for community screenings and sparked crucial discussions about online safety, digital security and freedom of expression.

Tech Tales Youth 2: Defending Internet Freedom in Bangladesh and Malaysia²

Tech Tales Youth 2 expands the digital rights movement in Asia-Pacific through compelling visual storytelling, building on the success of Tech Tales: Films about Digital Rights in the Asia-Pacific and Tech Tales Youth Philippines and Thailand. This new edition focuses on Malaysia and Bangladesh, where emerging filmmakers create powerful short films that address pressing digital rights challenges in their local contexts. The project has a strong emphasis on mentorship and peer and community support, with selected filmmakers guided in shaping their story ideas to align with key digital rights issues relevant to their specific contexts, as well as ways to maximize their films' impact.

The films from Bangladesh explore the intersection of digital rights and social justice: from the impact of internet shutdowns on disabled workers and digital labor, to privacy violations during political unrest, to how digital harassment and online extremism affect the trans community. Meanwhile, the Malaysian films delve into critical issues of online safety and social cohesion: examining online grooming and exploitation of teenagers, the manipulation of social media regulations following cyberbullying-related deaths, and how digital disinformation fuels racial and religious tensions in multi-cultural communities.

Beyond serving as informative tools, these films contribute to growing the digital rights movement by bringing new allies into the space and creating compelling advocacy materials that can be used in film festivals, community screenings and grassroots campaigns.

Successful Regional Premieres

The Malaysian premiere, held on 18 January 2025 at Toffee in Kuala Lumpur, drew over one hundred attendees from civil society organizations, film initiatives and student groups. Co-organized with Freedom Film Network Malaysia, the region's longest-running human rights film festival organizer, the event featured six short films exploring pressing digital rights issues, including online grooming, digital discrimination and government surveillance.

The films deeply resonated with audiences, particularly in exploring how digital rights intersect with Malaysia's complex social landscape. "Balang Terang" examined the impact of online disinformation on racial and religious harmony, while "Hai Anis" addressed the increasing threat of online grooming targeting Malaysian youth.

The Bangladesh premiere, held on 4 February 2025 at the Bangabandhu International Convention Center in Dhaka, gathered ninety participants, primarily students and civil society representatives. Co-organized with the youth-led digital rights organization Activate Rights, the screening took place after the DRAPAC Digital Rights National Convening, amplifying discussions around critical issues like internet shutdowns, online harassment and digital security.

The Bangladesh collection featured compelling works, including "The Black Kite," exploring how internet shutdowns affect disabled gig workers,

“Whispers of the Ink,” examining privacy violations during political unrest, and “Echoes of Exile,” highlighting digital harassment faced by marginalized communities.



Seated on stage during the Q&A session (from left): Tech Tales Youth advisory board member Saiyeed Shahjada Al-Kareem, filmmakers Ishtiyak Ahmad Zihad (“Whispers of the Ink”), Lamea Tanjin Tanha (“Echoes of Exile”), Taosin Md. Bahadurshah Zafar (“The Black Kite”) and Tech Tales Youth Project Lead King Catoy. (Bangabandhu International Convention Center in Dhaka, 4 February 2025.)



Ishtiyak Zihad, Director of “Whispers of the Ink”, attended a Q & A session with fellow Tech Tales Youth filmmaker Lamea Tanha at Gopalganj Science and Technology University.



Tech Tales Youth filmmakers engage in a Q&A session at the Malaysian premiere in Kuala Lumpur (from left): Intan Sakinah (“Balang Terang”), Azura Nasron (“Hai Anis”), and Tech Tales Youth Project Lead King Catoy.



Indigeneity and Sovereignty watch party for Cinemata Currents. Image from Vietnam National University's Cinema Club.

Distribution Challenges and Opportunities

The film collection includes “Echoes of Exile,” which addresses critical issues facing Bangladesh’s *hijra* community. Given the sensitive nature of LGBTQ+ topics in Bangladesh, the project team is particularly interested in connecting with international organizations that can help amplify these important stories and support broader discussions about gender identity and human rights in the region.

Impact through Mentorship and Community Engagement

Tech Tales Youth integrates filmmaking with digital rights advocacy through a structured mentorship program. The project began with an intensive digital rights and impact production workshop in Kuala Lumpur last September 2024, where young filmmakers received mentorship from an advisory board of regional experts. This foundation in both creative storytelling and advocacy has enabled the filmmakers to lead various community initiatives:

- Bangladeshi filmmakers Taosin Zafar and Ishtiyak Ahmad Zihad brought digital rights discussions to the Bangladesh University of Professional FilmFest 2025;
- “Balang Terang” director Intan Sakinah, partnering with Architects of Diversity, developed an interactive screening module on identifying disinformation;
- Filmmaker Azura Nasron is creating the “Hai Anis Campaign Toolkit” to facilitate discussions on online grooming prevention while conducting screenings with Malaysian children’s rights organization Monsters Among Us Get Involved.

Organizations interested in hosting screenings can access the following:

- Free film screenings
- Campaign toolkits and discussion guides
- Support for impact activities
- Connection with young filmmakers.

Potential screening partners include:

- Educational institutions (high schools and universities)

- Youth organizations and community centers
- Religious institutions and cultural centers
- Civil society organizations and advocacy groups
- Media organizations and film schools.

Cinemata's Audience

Who makes up Cinemata's audience?

Cinemata's diverse audience encompasses a wide range of individuals and groups who share a common interest in socially impactful content. This includes filmmakers and video collectives seeking a platform to showcase their work, educators, researchers, looking for thought-provoking material and valuable resources for educational purposes, human rights and environmental advocates and activists dedicated to raising awareness on critical issues, as well as film festivals, film curators, and film initiatives seeking to showcase new content that are relevant to their causes. Additionally, civil society and nonprofit organizations utilize Cinemata to disseminate their messages and promote their causes to a broader audience.

Trusted Users

Cinemata has "Trusted Users" who get more features such as a wider array of publishing options, efficient uploads, AI transcription, English translation, and password-protection of content.

Trusted Users are not just regular account holders. They play a crucial role in upholding the platform's vision, which revolves around social issue films centered on the Asia-Pacific region. These users deeply understand the platform's core focus and are granted a special privilege - the ability to publish their videos to the public without requiring review.

Concluding Remark

At a time when freedom of expression faces growing challenges, Cinemata affirms the importance of community-driven digital spaces for movement building. EngageMedia invites filmmakers, activists, and educators in the Asia-Pacific to be part of a community that builds technology which puts advocacy, security and digital sovereignty front and center.

Annex

Society, Secrets, and Silence: Digital Literacy in a Deceptive World

Written by Izzah Dejavu

"A predator can groom a child for sex in just one hour,"³ warns Senior Assistant Commissioner Siti Kamsiah Hassan, head of the Bukit Aman CID Sexual, Women and Children Crime Investigation Division (D11).

One hour is all it takes—that's how little time it takes for a predator to infiltrate a child's world. Social media becomes a tool for manipulation, a window into the lives of the vulnerable.

"We cannot avoid the fact that educating children starts at home," she reminds us. "Parents must teach their children about self-control, the risks around them, and how to assess them. Crimes now start from the comfort of your own home."

But the question that remains unanswered—or perhaps one that many lack the courage to confront—is this: How do we start a conversation about something shrouded in silence while the very idea of grooming, sexual harassment,⁴ and child exploitation⁵ is still considered taboo⁶ in Malaysia?

Malaysia and Religious Conservatism

Across Southeast Asia, digital rights are no longer just about access—they are about survival in an increasingly monitored⁷ and manipulated online world. In Malaysia, the convergence of growing religious conservatism⁸ and digital control is reshaping how society engages in conversations⁹ about sex education and safety. This conservatism is not just present in the policies governing public life but is deeply rooted in how families and communities perceive morality.¹⁰

For women and girls especially, talking about sex—even in the context of safety and consent—remains shrouded in stigma and shame.¹¹ This culture of silence doesn't just suppress conversations; it systematically excludes women and girls from critical discussions about their own safety, where women have experienced limited access to public discourse and decision-making.¹² This further widens the gap in digital literacy, deepening this vulnerability. Without the tools to navigate online spaces safely, young people are left exposed to exploitation,¹³ cyberbullying, and grooming.¹⁴ Meanwhile, adults struggle to bridge this conversation with their

children—not because they don't care, but because finding the right words requires both eloquence and a level of openness many were never taught to have.

The Story of Many Women

Azura Nasron's film, "Hai Anis"¹⁵ offers an urgent look at the harsh realities of online grooming and digital exploitation. Through Anis's journey, viewers are confronted with the sinister ease with which predators manipulate victims in the digital world. The film opens with a chilling exchange of flirtatious messages between an adult and a teenager, escalating into explicit content—a stark reminder of how easily grooming can occur.

"Hai Anis" is not just a story of Azura Nasron; it is a reflection of the lived experiences of countless women, young people, and survivors whose voices are often silenced. This is not an isolated incident; it is a growing epidemic spanning generations. Ask any woman or girl, and chances are, she has endured something similar or knows someone who has. These stories, buried beneath layers of shame and silence, reveal one painful truth: In the digital age, predators operate unchecked.

The urgency of this issue is highlighted by the alarming increase in sexual offences involving children.¹⁶ According to the Children Statistics Malaysia 2024 report¹⁷ released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the number of cases of sexual offences involving children reported to the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) rose by 26.5 percent, reaching 1,567 cases in 2023, compared to 1,239 cases in 2022. This troubling statistic underscores the pressing need for immediate action, as the digital world continues to expose young people to exploitation and harm.

Reimagination of Digital Rights

The recent passing of the Online Safety Bill 2024,¹⁸ with its promise to hold platforms accountable for failing to protect children and to curb harmful content, presents a glimmer of hope¹⁹ in addressing the legal loopholes within Malaysia's current legal system. Yet, it remains a small thread in the tangled web of regulation,²⁰ struggling to keep pace with the fast-evolving digital world. Legislation, though abundant, remains trapped in the slow churn of bureaucracy, while the reality²¹ on the ground remains murky at best.

Malaysian teenager Ain Hushiza's viral TikTok video ignited the #MakeSchoolASaferPlace movement, which gained further momentum through political artist Fahmi Reza's powerful illustration urging students to speak up about unsafe school environments.

But this is not only a matter of policy—it is about a profound shift in how we view the digital world, and how we choose to navigate it. The task before us is not simply to update laws, but to engage every layer of society—NGOs, families, communities, the public—each must stand as guardians of a new narrative. A narrative that says: Enough is Enough. A narrative where respect is not optional, where the rights of women and girls are not negotiable, and where predators are held accountable, not just by law, but by their very own conscience. This could also begin with equipping parents with resources to discuss online safety, supporting teachers to integrate digital literacy into curriculums, and creating safe spaces where young people can report concerns without fear of judgment or shame.

“Hai Anis” shows us how predators exploit digital spaces to groom young victims. However, it also points to solutions: teaching youth to recognize manipulation tactics and building support networks where they can safely report concerns. As the spirit of Paulo Freire’s work reminds us, “Education does not transform the world. Education changes people. People change the world.” Meaningful digital empowerment requires more than awareness—it demands action, collective responsibility, and a commitment to dismantling the culture of silence that allows harm to persist. It’s time for all of us to step up and ensure that digital spaces are safe for everyone, especially our children.

Izzah Dejavu is a writer and human rights advocate dedicated to advancing social justice through community engagement, public discourse and activism. She is passionate about gender equality, expanding civic space, and defending human rights—to amplify marginalized voices and challenge oppressive systems.

Endnotes

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