

Dong Hyun Song: Unintended Cyber Activism through Online Daily Practice in Korea

Abstract:

This article examines the cultural and political anxieties caused by the embeddedness of ICTs and the internet in Korean society. These anxieties emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 Candlelight protest and reflect a struggle between the Korean government, Korean web portals and Korean internet users, reflecting the wider evolution of cyberspace in Korean society. This argument will be substantiated through the analysis of policy, interviews, and online participant observation.

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Author:

Dong Hyun Song:

- Media & Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London U.K.
- ☎ + 44 - 777 – 573 1227 , ✉ cop01ds@gmail.com, cop01ds@gold.ac.uk
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 - Song D.H. (2011): 'Power struggles in Korean cyberspace and Korean cyber asylum seekers', Cultural Policy, Criticism and Management Research 5: 47-71.

Introduction

"In Korea, collective power separated from the state apparatus is transformed into a spectacle such as people filling the street with candles."¹

Anti-government protests, known as the Candlelight protests, broke out across South Korea in 2008, reflecting growing tensions between civil power and that of the state. The demonstrations began in protest against the new Korea-US Free Trade Agreement which allowed US beef imports from cattle over 30 months old without health inspections by Korean customs and despite the high risk of mad cow disease.² The most striking feature of Candlelight 2008 was the interweaving of online and offline culture as well as typically non-participating groups' active engagement with public events. For example, Suhong Chae and Soojin Kim (2010) argue that women participants' active engagement with the protest both online and offline, the Baby Stroller Brigades in particular, was a result of their awareness of 'the various social and political problems surrounding them', which led to their 'subjectivity formation.'³ In the same vein, Chul-Kyoo Kim et al. (2010) and Yun Seongy et al. (2011) point out that youth participation in the protest through online activities and offline participation led to their 'political awakening'.⁴ In the same vein, as Do-Hyun Han (2010), Ho-Young Lee (2008) and Kyung Jae Song (2008) also argue, ordinary Korean citizens became active participants by transforming online communities and forums, previously utilised for daily trivia, into places where internet users gained and shared information relating to the protest, including the organisation of meetings on the ground. Such online practice rooted in everydayness had enabled ordinary people, regardless of sex and age, to participate the protest. That is, the momentum of the protest could be maintained by ordinary people traversing online, sharing information and linking online communities into one network to be against the Lee administration's international political decision as briefly described above.

As a result of 100 days of protest, online activism, and despite the Lee administration's 'human rights violations' intended to stop the protests,⁵ the protesters succeeded in making their voices heard in the political arena, leading to the President to apologies for his administration's decision.⁶ Overall, Candlelight 2008 made the public aware of the importance of internet politics.⁷

However, straight after the protests ceased, the Lee administration began to silence these public voices in Korean cyberspace by deleting anti-government postings as well as arresting netizens who had participated in the protests.⁸ It is important to note, as Chaibong Hahm does, that South Korean democracy has not been well established and has also become diluted as 'an imperial presidency, oligarchic parties, divisive regionalism and political corruption' has continued to wield influence over the political process.⁹ In the same vein, internet control as part of state control over the media in contemporary Korean society, as Kwang-Yeong Shin argues,¹⁰ can be identified in this instance. It must also be borne in mind that the internet practices that the participants during Candlelight 2008 deployed profoundly shaped the Lee administration's attitude to cyberspace. Ever since the emergence of the internet in Korean society in 1998, successive governments have viewed it as a

1 Ranciere in Chul-Kyoo Kim et al.: Teenage Participants of the 2008 Candlelight Vigil. 16

2 Song, Dong Hyun: Power struggles in Korean cyberspace and Korean cyber asylum seekers

3 Suhong Chae and Soojin Kim: The Candlelight Protest and the Politics of the Baby Stroller Brigades. 96

4 Chul-Kyoo Kim and Hea-Jin Lee: Teenage Participants of the 2008 Candlelight Vigil. 247

5 Amnesty International 2008: Policing the Candlelight Protest in South Korea

6 Song, Dong Hyun 2011: Power struggles in Korean cyberspace and Korean cyber asylum seekers

7 Kim, Ho-Ki et al. 2008: The Candle Demonstration and Korean Democracy

8 Amnesty International: Policing the Candlelight Protest in South Korea

9 Hahm, Chaibong 2008: South Korea's miraculous democracy. 130

10 Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2012: The Dilemmas of Korea's New Democracy in an Age of Neoliberal Globalisation. 305

business rather than as a medium for social and political communication. Policies on internet commerce concentrated on manufacturing enterprises, such as network build up.¹¹ This was confirmed by officials at KCC:

"The fast development of the Internet enabled Korea to have the best infrastructure and hardware, and it become a strong IT power as a consequence ... However, there were no thoughts about the development of content, i.e. how it could be used."¹²

Indeed, the virtue of increasing economic development via IT infrastructure, as promoted by the state, resulted in a policy gap in terms of intervening in cyberspace with the intention to support freedom of expression. The efficacy of the legislation on the internet was unbalanced as the state had not conceived of cyberspace as a significant place to be drawn under legislative and legal authority until the 2008 protest occurred.

While the measures on the internet exerted by the Lee government demonstrated its capacity to silence Korean cyberspace as 'Reporters Without Borders' noted,¹³ Korean web portals merely followed the central authority's requests, thus making its cyber control efforts exceedingly effective. Such submissiveness resulted from the attitude of Korean internet institutions to the state. Korean internet culture is centred on web portals, and the market is largely dominated by Naver.com, Daum.net and Nate.com. As a spokesperson for the web industry stated:

"When Korean web portals started to launch their businesses, there were few Korean-language websites. In fact, there was no Korean content. There was content such as blogs and online cafe services that users had created with tools offered by web portals. Another content category is one that web portals created themselves, which did not involve users contributing to the database."¹⁴

When Korean web portals began to set up their systems, they lacked any substantial Korean content as most of it was in English. Thus, each web portal needed to create its own content and maximise the number of users uploading posts. As a consequence, they became 'closed systems' in the sense that they did not share content with each other, because content is their capital regardless of whether this it is created by the web portal or by its users. As a result, Korean web portals tended to become the final destination of users rather than guiding and directing them to an appropriate website. Rather than guiding them to other websites with a link system ('out-bounding') as a result of their queries, the web portals try to make users stay on their site by displaying content in their own communities, blogs and through Q&As.¹⁵

Considering this Korean cyber morphology, this article analyses the struggles that emerged in the aftermath of Candlelight 2008. These struggles took place between the tripartite network that frames Korean cyberspace, i.e. the Korean government, Korean web portals and Korean internet users. I have adopted three methodological approaches to data collection, namely policy analysis, interviews and online participant observation, as these multiple data-collection methods serve to uncover new appreciations of how and why these three actors relate to each other and how they reacted to the aftermath of Candlelight 2008.

Anxieties in Korean Cyberspace after Candlelight 2008

Marianne Franklin's (2010) term "cyberscape", which is adapted from Appadurai's (1996) term '-scape', urges us to re-think the concept of cyberspace. As she argues, "cyberscape" is 'particular to the sort of "imagined

11 All interviews were conducted anonymously. Interview, 13 Aug 2010

12 Interview, 22 July 2010

13 Reporters Without Borders 2012: For Freedom of Information, South Korea

14 Interview, 8 Aug. 2010

15 Kim, Yong Ju 2008: Portal Business, the Outcome and Future

words" now constituted by, experienced as, and circulated through cyberspatial practices'.¹⁶ The public, through the power of the powerless, experiences how online territories are interwoven with society. Her theoretical position is that online is no longer a virtual space for users to reflect on their daily lives offline. Rather, online is an actual space in terms of producing and reproducing political, social and cultural issues. In the same vein, David Morley (2001) asserts that the discussion on cyberspace should focus on 'material practices and settings of everyday life' rather than dichotomisation of online vs. offline. Miyase Christensen et al also argue that 'new types of social territories' have come into shape, which resulted from 'online connectivity and sociability'.¹⁷ Candlelight 2008 and its aftermath should be understood in this context. The protest was the moment when "cyberscape" became separated from mediascape within the political arena. At the same time, the state's oppressive intervention and consequential conflict between non-state actors and internet users resulted from increasing anxieties about the new place of ICTs in Korean society.

Korean cyberspace, which was previously deemed to be a predominantly economic and cultural place, generated political power during Candlelight 2008. The political materiality of Korean cyberspace became actualised during the protest and this resulted in the reconfiguration of "cyberscape" in a political manner, which was ultimately driven by state power. Candlelight 2008 unveiled a moment when cyberspace transformed into a space separate from the mediascape, thereby making a unique contribution to the formation of Korean culture and politics.

Tripartite Approach

"The VIP [referring to the President] did not know about the internet, well he doesn't have any political philosophy on this ... He did not know the power of the internet, so there was no preparation for communicating with the public via the internet at the beginning of the Lee administration ... That is, the 2008 Candlelight demonstrations were the result of miscommunication ... he did not know how to handle the issue of the internet politically."¹⁸

The interview quoted above suggests that Lee had failed to understand the nature of Candlelight 2008 fully, as well as the sincerity of online public voices. The power holders (i.e. the government) were paranoid during Candlelight 2008 because their leader did not understand Korean cyberspace. It can be inferred that the series of policies announced after the protests followed from the anxieties of these political groups.¹⁹ My research shows that until Candlelight 2008, cyberspace in Korea was not considered to be an important space in a power-political sense. As one interviewee in the internet industry stated, 'no legislation or laws exist in order to promote the software of IT' because the Korean government paid too much attention to 'investing more funds to develop the infrastructure device industry and network enhancement'.²⁰ That is, it is not because cyberspace was not politically influential, but the state did not pay attention to the significance of people's activities in cyberspace until Candlelight 2008.

The State's Oppressive Cyber Intervention and Korean Web Portals' Submissiveness

The Lee administration politicised the internet in response to Candlelight 2008. As Eriksson et al. state, internet control can be understood in three ways, which are to control '(1) access to the internet, (2) functionality of

16 Franklin, Marianne 2010: Digital Dilemmas: Transnational Politics in the 21st Century. 79

17 Christensen, Miyase et al. 2009: Introduction: Globalization, Mediated Practice and Social Space. 5

18 Interview, 22 July 2010

19 The President's mindset is the most influential factor in the establishment of regulations because the heads of government bodies like Korean internet agencies are appointed by the President and they belong to the ruling party.

20 Interview, 13 Aug 2010.

the internet, and (3) activity on the internet'.²¹ The Lee administration's cyber control falls under the third category, as it prosecuted users as well as deploying the police to silence online voices. The Lee administration's cyber control during and after Candlelight 2008 was intended to block postings against the government, to trace internet users' IP addresses and to shape the political discourse by identifying malicious content online which needed to be controlled by the state. The examples from my research cited below demonstrate that they arrested famous anti-government netizens and accused them of disseminating false information in 2009.

In March 2009, the chief prosecutor arrested a producer of a television programme, *P.D. note*, which had broadcasted a news item on the dangers of diseased US beef, and it was alleged that the programme had distorted the truth. In April 2009, the entire staff of *P.D. note* was arrested. The prosecutor scrutinised the programme's lead writer's email account and publicised its contents as evidence that they had intentionally distorted the danger of US beef.²² There are many other cases in which Candlelight 2008 protestors were legally prosecuted by the government, as the Lee administration placed internet users who posted anti-government messages under surveillance and the Korean web portals deleted anti-government postings at the government's request. As Goldsmith and Wu (2006) assert, the idea of control over the internet through government regulation applies to the Lee regime, which attempted to regulate Korean cyberspace. However, the Lee administration's cyber control would not have been possible without the submissiveness of Korean web portals. For example, the Korean web portal Daum.net handed over personal information of people working for the *P.D. note* programme. The attitude of the web portals certainly had a direct impact on domestic email services. Daum Communications' yearbook 'Sustainable Growth Report' (2010) found that customer dissatisfaction with Daum.net's email service had increased between 2009 and 2010: 'Very Unsatisfied' ratings rose from 8.7% to 14%, 'Dissatisfaction' grew from 5.2 % to 8%.

*"Business enterprises merely went along with this [law], but the laws were normally applied to the public via our service platform. That is, if a person's basic human rights are infringed while he/she uses our service, they blame us."*²³

The web portals found themselves in the unfortunate position of being blamed for the Lee administration's sins. Based on interviews with web portal representatives, I conclude that adopting a political or non-political position was not their choice, as they had no political interest outside of their commercial priorities. However, the submissive tendencies in their pursuit of non-political goals were, in itself, a political act.

Cyber Asylum Seekers

*"People established a consensus that they were merely actively communicating in cyberspace. Then the government started to intervene online. People suddenly realised that this was also a reality and they thought they needed to come up with something quickly ... I do not feel secure about using Korean email services."*²⁴

While the Lee administration successfully intervened cyberspace by acting against anti-government internet users, accusing them of disseminating false information, internet users began to migrate some of their activities from Korean-based online platforms to global ones, a phenomenon known as Cyber Asylum Seeking. This epithet came into being when it became known that the Korean government had also requested that Google Korea provided individuals' personal information, but it failed to acquire this information. An official at Google stated that:

21 Ericksson, Johan: Who Controls What, and Under What Conditions? 206

22 Kim, Jong Wha 18 June 2009: Dispute relating to PD Note

23 Interview, 13 Aug. 2010

24 Interview, 8 Sept. 2010

"The Korean government requested personal information approximately 10 times last year. Government bodies still requested from us that we hand over the IDs of our customers, because they think we record the resident registration numbers of our customers. We open our members' email information only if a case meets the remit of international law and US law simultaneously. The case must be defined as criminal by anyone's standard. If the case does not fulfil these requirements, we do not make our customers' information available."²⁵

Gmail, which does not need to comply with Korean law, denied the Lee administration's request to hand over Korean internet users' personal information. As a consequence, the Korean press reported that Gmail's average weekly PV [Page per View] amounted to 1,300,000 in April 2009. After the incident of the *P.D. note* scriptwriter, it increased by 20% by June 2009, to 1,600,000.²⁶ Many interviewees thought that this was a direct result of the Lee administration's cyber intervention, which only applied to Korean internet service providers. For example, the Korean internet industry defined itself as a victim of Candlelight 2008. An official at Daum.net states that:

"We are also a victim of Cyber Asylum Seeking. Last year Gmail was No.1 [in the Korean market] in terms of time duration. What this signifies is that people who use email, actively moved [away] from our company to Gmail. After the email account of the writer of the TV programme P.D. Note was scrutinized by the government, our email service usage rate dropped significantly. It is worrying ... If people leave, because the quality of our service is bad, then we should be able to attract them back again by upgrading our service. If not, something is wrong."²⁷

The statements above displayed the anxiety of domestic web portal enterprises when faced with competition from global internet service enterprises, as well as testifying to their desire to maintain a relative monopoly within a closed system. It is important to note that during this same period Google followed the Chinese government's rules and censorship, which contradicts its stance in Korea.²⁸ It would be more appropriate to say that their actions amounted to strategic maneuvering in Korean cyberspace. They did not follow the Korean government's request to delete the postings as well as to hand over details relating to their users' emails as stated above. This may have resulted from the fact that Korean internet market is not as significant as that of China. However, paradoxically, their non-submissiveness to the Korean government's requests resulted in their further penetration into the Korean internet market and subsequent profits.

The Expansion of Korean 'cyberscape'

Hamoud Salhi argues that the state controls the throne of the internet, which results from the state's 'ownership of the legitimate use of force and the authority to regulate cyberspace within its territory'.²⁹ This state-driven internet control discourse positions internet service providers as inferior to the state, whether they are global corporations or local businesses. However, the veracity of this theoretical position has to be modified in the Korean context, at least when considering internet user activities.

The Significance of the Cyber Asylum Seekers Phenomenon

I argue that the label 'cyber asylum seekers' was a transient phenomenon rather than a unified movement with an explicit strategy to seek freedom of speech. The anxieties of Korean internet users due to their distrust

²⁵ INews24 28 June 2009: 'Cyber Asylum' Spread to Emails

²⁶ Seoul Newspaper 24 July 2008: I cannot stand regulations; netizens' cyber asylum seeking

²⁷ Interview, 3 Sept. 2010, also cited in Song, Dong Hyun: Power struggles in Korean cyberspace and Korean cyber asylum seekers.

²⁸ BBC 23 Mar. 2012: China and Net Censorship

²⁹ Salhi Hamoud 2009: The State Still Governs. 211

of the state as well as the Korean internet service providers resulted in their leaving their usual online places where their memories – including contacts and stories with friends and family – were stored. They left to maintain their everyday activities online without suffering any anxieties about being watched by the government rather than as an explicit challenge to government power. However, this individual cyber migration turned into political activism when users moved away from Korean-based email service providers to Gmail, thereby transforming power relations. Thus, ordinary Koreans' cyber practice in their everyday lives broke the government's cyber control mechanisms.

The Impact of the Regulation of Cyberspace

The majority of the internet users that were arrested and fined, including staff of *PD Note*, were eventually acquitted after mid-2009.³⁰ While the government's tactical use of its administrative jurisdiction to silence anti-government voices was successful to some extent, it caused the Lee administration to lose its authority in cyberspace due to the failure of its cyber governance. This failure led to plans to abolish internet regulatory bodies such as the Korean Communication Standard Commission.³¹ As the state put cyberspace under pressure and web portals followed state rule, internet users agonised, and some of them left Korean cyberspace and moved into global cyberspace. Subsequently, global web service providers entered the Korean internet market as an alternative locus of power to the state and the web portals. The web portals lost some of their established markets, namely the streaming service and SNS sectors, due to the new players that had entered the market from 2009. Korean web portals are driven by profit motives and can operate alongside the state as long as political values do not hinder their market performance. The web portals' abysmal performance at making their voices heard within the regulatory framework was based on this motivation. The launch of the Korean Internet Self-Regulation Organization (KISO) should be understood in this context. The web portal industry launched KISO in 2009 in an attempt to redefine the relationship between the government and Korean internet enterprises. KISO (2009) publishes its own guidelines for the regulation of web portal activities, thus signalling the industry's ability to self-regulate. It is also expected to build a system of cooperation between public regulation and commercial self-regulation in order to foster public trust in the running of Korean cyberspace.

Conclusion

In the course of the most recent evolution of "cyberscape" in Korean society, the state's explicit cyber control and the Korean web portals' submissiveness can be identified as key driving forces. The Korean internet users' distrust of the power holders and their traversal to global providers had a great impact on the reconfiguration and expansion of Korean cyberspace, resulting in global web service providers' successful establishment in several sectors of the Korean market. The Korean web portals then changed their attitude from submissiveness to the state to that of champion of their users' freedom of speech. Simply put, they sensed that their customers were leaving and experienced a fall in profits. The Lee administration's changed its regulatory framework due to its inability to control global web service providers and as a result of complaints from local corporations about neutrality. To understand the Cyber Asylum Seekers phenomenon within the larger context of these struggles, we should question whether the move to global service providers resulted in a significant destabilisation of dominant power relations in Korean cyberspace. Alternatively, we could argue that Korean internet users who began to use global web services in their online practices seamlessly integrated global web service into the Korean cyberspace constellation.

30 Associated Press 20 April 2009: South Korean blogger cleared of spreading false information.

The Korea Herald 2 Sept. 2012: Supreme Court clears 'PD Notebook' directors and program.

31 Interview, 18 Jan. 2012

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- 8 August 2010: Interview with an official at internet industry, at a cafe in Seoul.
- 13 August 2010: Interview with an official at internet industry, at the interviewee's office in Seoul.
- 8 September 2010: Interview with member of online café 'Agora Justice Forum', at a café in Seoul.
- 18 January 2012: Interview with an official at an internet-related government body, at a café in London.