Article

Online Collectivism, Individualism and Anonymity in East Asia

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Abstract

Anonymity on the Internet has come under increasing criticism as a threat to public civility and safety. This article draws data from related academic studies, trade press and mass media to examine recent variations in the salience, use, and comparative value of anonymity, and its tripartite relationship with individuality and collectivism, across three specific cultural contexts: China, South Korea, and Japan. While online anonymity in East Asia plays a role in affiliation and in acts of collective cognition, it is also valued as an individual privacy resource. We must be especially wary about assuming social systems might be better off, more secure, without it.

Introduction

Entering the second decade of the 21st century, anonymity appears to be under siege. While targeted behavioral advertising continues to expand and personal information becomes increasingly commoditized, government officials around the globe warn us that true anonymity is in conflict with not only national security goals but also the very notion of civil discourse itself. Anonymous discourse is nasty and full of disinformation, it is increasingly said, and feeds the madness of crowds. Indeed, there appear to be growing questions about the continued viability of online anonymity going forward. Will anonymity turn out to be a relic of the 20th century or does it have a future?

There is a wide range of approaches to anonymity across the world; some are parts of cultural tradition, while others seem more emergent, less bound by established norms. While the focus of this paper is on online anonymity, its role and importance is shaped by the broader social context of on and offline reality. The relationship between the state and its people, as well as the traditional fora of social organization, shape and are now increasingly shaped by online behavior. Cultures which tend to repress individual expression in traditional social situations at work or in face-to-face group settings may value online anonymity to a greater degree. A society with a healthy free press and protections for human rights may worry less about protecting anonymity.

Nissenbaum (1999) has written that the core affordance of online anonymity is “unreachability,” the inability for individual communication or action to be connected with a specific, real world person at a real world address. Recent work on the role of anonymity in the emergence of group norms, which I discuss below, suggests that anonymity also plays a role in affiliation and the efficient functioning of collectives. Specific contexts are always important, however. Although it is tempting to connect the

affiliation value of anonymity with Eastern, collectivist cultures and the autonomy value with those in the West, this would obscure its dual role.

This article will examine recent variations in the salience, use, and comparative value of anonymity across three specific cultural contexts in the general region known as East Asia: Japan, South Korea, and China. The study is based on data from related academic work, trade press and mass media. Anonymity is framed in this investigation as a critical “context relative informational norm” (Nissenbaum 2010) and as a resource that can be cultivated or constrained via government policy. The paper discusses each country in turn before offering concluding thoughts.

Why East Asia?

Holcombe (2001: 3) has written that East Asia could represent “the single most important major alternative historical evolutionary track to Western civilization on the face of this planet.” Although it is quite common to contrast Eastern and Western culture in terms of collective and individual perspectives, there is a growing body of scholarly research that challenges this view (Takano and Osaka 1999; Hasegawa and Hirose 2005). It is often assumed, incorrectly, that a penchant for emphasizing collective and societal needs over that of individuals results in a very low cultural priority for privacy and anonymity. Anonymity and privacy are in fact highly valued across East Asia and have their own roots deep in society, though to clearly different degrees and for reasons that are often surprising (Farrall and Herold 2011; Adams, Murata and Orito 2009; Farrall 2008; Jho 2005; McDougall 2002).

East Asia as a region – Korea, China, Japan and Vietnam – is easier to define than almost any other region in the world. These countries can trace their origins back to the Neolithic period and Bronze Age of the region now known as China. Further, East Asia can be explicitly defined as those countries whose written language is based on Chinese characters. The countries in this region share many cultural aspects, including Confucianism and Buddhism, but have developed highly distinctive economic and political identities that are often in conflict. These different national identities help contribute to highly distinctive narratives of the emergence of online anonymity.

Defining “Anonymity”

Although we commonly understand the concept from its lexical components, simply being “without a name,” the reality is more complex and uncertain. A precise, mathematical definition of anonymity has been elusive (Machanavajjhala *et al.* 2006; Li, Li and Venkatasubramanian 2007). True anonymity is either very difficult or impossible to achieve online. Even without knowing an individual’s name or other typical personal identifier such as a social security number, phone number or address, re-identification can be achieved with the knowledge of a few of the subject’s more uncommon attributes (Ohm 2010; Arvind and Schmatikoff 2008; Sweeney 2002). Whether or not an individual actually is re-identified will depend upon a number of factors, including the resources available to the individual or entity seeking to make the re-identification and the importance of reaching the subject in question. For much of this article, I will be more concerned with the assumption that a user has when they are communicating online than I am with the reality of their anonymity.

It is understood that anonymity online has both positive and negative aspects in society. Anonymity affords free speech and criticism of established power without fear of reprisal (Akdeniz 2002). Anonymity means fewer constraints on anti-social behavior (no accountability), leading to a wider preponderance of flaming and personal attacks (Alonzo 2004) sometimes severe enough to lead to suicide. Different contexts and value conflicts make it difficult to take an absolute position for or against anonymity.

There is a common but important distinction between two types of online anonymity. I refer to them here as level 1, “full anonymity” and level 2, “pseudonymity.” The Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) literature refers to level 1 anonymity communication as “total lack of identifiability” and level 2 as “disassociation of a virtual identity with one’s physical identity” (Azechi 2005).

In addition to this basic distinction, I will consider both individual and collectivistic motivations for anonymity practice. Across the East Asian region, anonymity can be associated with both the protection of one’s individual identity (Nissenbaum’s unreachability) and the surrendering of one’s identity to a collective, higher-level entity, what Morio and Bucholz (2009) refer to as the “affiliation” goal:

Individuals in Eastern cultures are oriented toward interdependence, value the harmony of the group, and are therefore, more motivated by affiliation than by autonomy. When interacting with other group members, individuals from Eastern cultures are more likely to conform to group standards and mimic other individual’s behavior. On the other hand, individuals in Western cultures value competence and independence; thus, their behavior is governed by autonomy motivation. Their goals are to be unique, independent, and competent. ... we argue that individuals in Western cultures will gravitate toward online communities that allow lower levels of anonymity...; while, individuals in Eastern cultures will be more likely to seek out online communities that promote the highest level of anonymity (i.e., lack of identifiability) (p. 7).

A strong clue that the East Asian motives for anonymity span both collective and individual goals, however, is the long term Chinese linguistic distinction between *wuming* 无名 and *niming* 匿名 (Hertz 2001). *Wuming*, or “without a name,” refers more to individuals who subsume themselves into a larger group or collective, whose individual names become irrelevant in the face of the larger identity of which they are a part. *Niming*, on the other hand, refers to the act of deliberately concealing one’s identity from others, the unreachability motivation we generally impute to online anonymity in the West. As we explore Japan, South Korea and China below, we will see numerous examples of both.

Japan

The Japanese, despite common wisdom to the contrary, value the privacy of their personal information (Adams, Murata and Orito 2009). This public norm helps to explain the difficulty the Japanese government has had instituting a national ID system.

The most recent candidate for national ID, the Basic Resident Registers Network System (Juki Net), was officially launched in August 2003. Juki Net linked up residency databases of local governments into a central database, with each citizen being assigned an 11-digit number. Despite the fact that data stored by JukiNet is limited to name, sex, date of birth and address, there was considerable public resistance to the system, with many voicing concerns about privacy and their right to control personal data (Economist 2002). Separate lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of Juki Net were filed by residents in Aichi, Ishikawa, Osaka and other prefectures, and some localities refused to participate outright. In March of 2008, Japan’s Supreme Court ruled that JukiNet did not violate the constitution, overturning a 2006 ruling by the Osaka court that had found in favor of the plaintiffs (Japan Times 2008). There is an optional smart card which citizens can carry, but as of 2009, in all but one Japanese city, the card had been adopted by less than 50% of the adult population (Wood 2009).

Although the Supreme Court’s decision removed any legal obstacles, confusion over the system remains high enough that the government is considering alternatives, such as a program that would introduce a common ID number for social security and taxation. One of the primary requirements of the new system, according to a government white paper, will be to “establish a third-party organization that has

supervisory authority and is entitled to impose penalties” for the mishandling of personal information (Hirose 2011, 6).

Internet Significance

Unlike South Korea and China, the Japanese government has never made any significant attempt to institute a real name policy for online communication. In Japan, anonymity often appears as one of the focal aspects of what it means to be online, so there would likely be less public tolerance for any formal policy attempt. Perhaps more importantly, the Internet has not yet become a major platform of political struggle, as one might argue it is for China and South Korea. A long-standing Japanese election law prohibits Japanese politicians from making use of the Internet for campaigning in the 12 days prior to an election (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003). Political candidates are allowed to have websites during this time, but they are not allowed to update them and may not post material via Facebook or Twitter (Masters 2009). Japanese Internet users may talk politics freely online, but even they are forbidden from engaging in campaign-related activities during the blackout period (Wilson 2011).

There are signs that politicians may be beginning to skirt the law. During the general election in August 2009, candidates of both the Liberal Democratic Party and Democratic Party of Japan updated their web sites and even posted Youtube videos, though they were careful not to mention the word “voting” directly (Kageyama 2009). Even though the technology savvy DPJ won a surprise victory, there is evidence that traditional media, especially television, were the primary channels for their election win (McCargo and Lee 2010).

The Internet does not appear to be on the same plane with either South Korea or China as a social force, either in general terms or the more specific political context. It is largely considered to be a seedy place, where rumors are mongered and sins of all kind perpetrated (Marx 2009). Traditional media generally frame the Internet in this light, and the majority of the public seems to agree (Austin 2011).

While the sense of information privacy is strong, studies have shown that Japanese uses of the Internet tend toward more individualistic “information seeking” goals while South Koreans tend to be more social (Ishi and Ogashahara 2007). A comparative study of online communication in South Korea and Japan found that roughly two thirds of all online relationships in Japan were online only, with the relationship members never meeting in real life (Hashimoto 2006, cited in Ishii 2008).

While social connections may play less of a role online compared to the rest of East Asia, Japan’s external cultural borders are also less porous than most. Although much ink has been spilled on the intranet-like nature of China behind the Great Firewall, Japan is in many ways more isolated. The Chinese written language is shared across distinct political territories, creating a transnational cultural sphere robust in information flow. The Japanese language, on the other hand, is more bound to the physical territory, a reality that is reflected online. As Coates and Holroyd (2003: 143) have remarked, “Overwhelmingly, Japan's face on the Internet is in Japanese, by Japanese and for Japanese.”

The Japanese Internet culture makes use of anonymity at levels among the highest in the world (Ishii 2008; Buchholz and Cross 2007). To better understand its role, I consider two of Japan’s most significant and highly distinctive homegrown Internet fora, the 2chan bulletin board system and the Mixi social network platform. Both count anonymity as a critical resource, but value different affordances. While 2chan tends to be dominated by interactions at level 1 anonymity, between people who have never met in the physical world, much of the interaction on Mixi is between closer, real world friends (Bovee and Cvitkovic 2010).

Mixi

Although they originally used their real names, Mixi users today communicate pseudonymously. Users disliked being “friended” by acquaintances they did not consider close. Mixi users prefer to confine their online socialization to their inner circles, rather than being exposed to a much wider audience of truly weak ties characteristic of the Facebook platform (Alabaster 2008). Social politeness customs made it hard to reject friend requests out of hand. Faces are now blurred and identities concealed behind avatars. The external anonymity of a protected pseudonym affords a leaner social network. The average size of the Mixi social network (the number of people in it), as of late 2011, was 45.6, compared to 130 for Facebook (Landsberg 2011).

Mixi users must register with their cell phones, which in turn require real name registration. So although identity information does not flow freely among public users, Japanese know their avatars can be easily linked to their real name by authorities. Mixi’s tolerance and even encouragement of this culture of pseudonymity distinguishes it from foreign competitors like Facebook and Google+, where real name policies are strictly enforced. Although Facebook has become popular recently, it appears that it is viewed as more of a professional networking platform like LinkedIn (Lippold 2011).

2chan

On Japan’s highly popular, legendary bulletin board 2chan, level 1 anonymity rules. Users have the option of posting with either a persistent pseudonym or entirely anonymously, but usually choose the latter (Matsumura 2005). Using one’s real name is a violation of group norms and is rarely tolerated. 2chan serves as an emotional release for people to throw off their weighty public persona for a few hours every day and speak from their hearts without fear of social shame. With its more than 800 forums and 2.5 million posts (Katayama 2007), 2chan has become a veritable social force that commands public attention. It is also a critical pressure release valve for discontent that might otherwise lead to major disruptions to the social order.

Researchers have noted the emergence of unique vocabulary, codes and dialects within 2chan that make it hard to decipher even by native Japanese speakers (McLelland 2008). This has tended to limit the number of studies of the anonymous forum, especially those in English. Still, extant research demonstrates that there is a very wide range of exchange on 2chan, from polite to impolite, from mainstream to the marginal and the extreme (Nishimura 2008). 2chan has been criticized for its lack of morality, the poor quality and reliability of its information, the high occurrence of hate speech and even for starting the morbid trend of anonymous group suicide.

Although much of what is found there would be considered evidence of the “negative” aspects of widespread anonymity, it would be a gross misrepresentation to characterize 2chan as nothing but a virtual Sodom and Gomorrah. 2chan can also provide environments for the highly efficient flow of information. Below, 2chan founder Hiroyuki Nishimura explains, in his own words, how completely anonymous (level 1) discourse has certain advantages over real name or even pseudonymous (level 2) communication:

If there is a user ID attached to a user, a discussion tends to become a criticizing game. On the other hand, under the anonymous system, even though your opinion/information is criticized, you don't know with whom to be upset. Also with a user ID, those who participate in the site for a long time tend to have authority, and it becomes difficult for a user to disagree with them. Under a perfectly anonymous system, you can say, “it’s boring,” if it is actually boring. All information is treated equally; only an accurate argument will work. (Furukawa 2003)

2chan can be a place to find real news and information that is censored or ignored by the mainstream media (Onishi 2004). Occasionally, stories that first appear on 2chan are picked up and run by traditional

media (Furukawa 2003). Messages there are regularly monitored by the police for any evidence of impending violence or terrorism.

This phenomenon of anonymous information sharing affords highly efficient, ad hoc, distributed cognition and collective action. The 2chan environment has facilitated positive social intervention, such as providing relief to victims of the October 2004 Niigata Prefecture Chuetsu earthquake, and the rapid generation and delivery of more than 800,000 paper cranes to the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Memorial to replace the cranes that had been destroyed by fire (Katayama 2007). In this context, anonymity can be less about concealing one's individual identity and more about surrendering to that of the group. This is the "affiliation" motivation that Morio and Bucholz (2009) discuss.

Anonymous group action on 2chan has also been very prankish. When Japanese bad boy comedian Masahi Tashiro was nominated for Time Magazine's person of the year, 2chan users hacked the time.com voting system to temporarily get him into the first position, above Osama bin Laden and George Bush (Katayama 2007). Similarly, when a local convenience store chain asked voters to choose the flavor of its new milkshake, 2chan users stuffed the ballot box with votes for kimchi (fermented cabbage) (Katayama 2008).

Although 2chan remains a popular Japanese website, it is not nearly as dominant now. According to Alexa, Google, Facebook and Twitter are all more popular. More interestingly, Alexa's demographic numbers show that young Japanese Internet users are not taking to 2chan the way the older generation did, suggesting that it could fade into oblivion over the next few decades. It may be easy to demonize 2chan and simply write it off as a den of iniquity whose time has passed, but it is important to recognize the dramatic way its code and conventions afford the free flow of information. While it may be true that spaces in which anonymity is cultivated will always be viewed as a potential threat to authority, the value and importance they have in insuring that important news can get out to the people and protecting against harmful imbalances in information flow should not be dismissed.

South Korea

South Korea has an extensive national ID system, one that has been in place since General Park's oppressive military regime made IDs mandatory for all citizens in 1968. All Korean adults are issued a unique registration number and an ID card, which they are required to carry at all times. The card is required in a wide range of contexts and is used to generate databases with comprehensive information about each Korean citizen (Lee 2007).

Korea is largely recognized as one of the most wired countries in the world. More than 99% of South Koreans under 30 are online, with the highest average bandwidth in the world (McDonald 2011). South Koreans make very active use of social networks, blogs and online learning collectives that blend both their on- and offline worlds.

The Internet established itself as a political force in South Korea with the presidential election of 2002. Reformist President Roh Myoo-hyun's victory has largely been credited to his youthful Internet support, in particular the populist Internet news site Ohmynews and the virtual political advocacy group Rohsamo (Fish 2009). Since then, youthful Internet users have been involved in a number of virtually organized political protests, including a candlelight vigil against American military occupation in the summer of 2002 and a campaign to impeach President Lee Myung-bak, which peaked with 100,000 youthful demonstrators on the streets in June 2008.

Originally, the Internet provided a space for anonymous online discussion and organization free from the nearly ubiquitous offline national ID system. The government first tried to push an online real name policy

in 2003. A March editorial in the newspaper *JoongAng Daily* announced a campaign to “create a safe and sound Internet.”

It depends on those who use it whether the greatest invention in the past 2,000 years of human history should be reduced to something that people avoid or made a modern convenience friendly to people. The first thing Internet users can do is participate in a movement to use real names in cyberspace. Another is reporting sites that spread harmful ideas and appeal to the prurient side of human nature.

We also ask that families, schools and institutes that teach the use of computer teach ethical codes of behavior for Internet users. Contamination of cyberspace has resulted mainly from the lack of etiquette in the use of this modern technology. Making a happy Internet world is up to us all (JoongAng Daily 2003).

Government officials cited statistics showing rising levels of online crime, but ultimately could not persuade the public to accept the policy. Events would soon occur, however, that would begin to alter both the government’s resolve and the public’s willingness to accept some real name requirements. The first of these events, a moment of extreme cyber-social shaming directed at a boorish subway rider, has become known as the dog poop girl story.

Dog Poop Girl

On a summer day in 2005, a woman got on the subway with her small dog, which proceeded to do its business on the floor of the subway car. Onlooking passengers asked her to clean up the mess. The woman rudely refused and then left the subway with her dog at the next stop. Unbeknownst to the woman, one of the passengers had taken cell phone pictures. Hours later, the woman’s photo and a narrative of her transgressions appeared online and rapidly spread across the blogosphere. An online mass of people, united by their disgust with the woman’s behavior, launched a campaign to identify and punish her. As the woman’s normal life became shattered by near constant harassment, she was forced to leave her university in disgrace.

A spirited debate ensued, both within Korea and all over the world, over the online public’s reaction. Many argued that the excessiveness of personal attacks crossed the line and were themselves an abuse of the woman’s human rights. South Korea’s traditional newspaper and television stations highlighted the Internet’s role in this dangerous behavior, with the newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* calling the online mass a “Korean cyber lynch mob” (Chosunilbo 2005).

The incident and the mainstream media spin which followed helped to spark a change in the public’s attitude toward the use of real names online, with more than 75% of Internet users supporting the adoption of a real name system in a fall 2005 Gallup poll (Kim 2005). The government quickly capitalized on the change, beginning first with two limited real name policies. The first focused on pre-election public discourse of news websites. The second targeted discussion forums larger than 300K, namely the two most popular forum sites Naver and Daum.

Real Name Election Discourse

The new policy had its first test run in the spring of 2006. The Korean National Election Commission ordered Internet news websites to require that all people who comment on their sites use their real names “when writing responses to politically related news articles” during the 12 day campaign period prior to election day (Fish 2009). Major fines would be levied for any sites refusing to comply with the directive.

Participants were required to register with their national ID numbers and real names would be displayed with their posts.

Internet news companies including the highly influential *Ohmynews*, along with civil rights activists worldwide, condemned the move, arguing that basic human rights of expression were being violated by this requirement. Without anonymity and the unreachability it affords, participants were less likely to test the boundaries:

“I cannot understand how government officials came up with this idea to introduce such regulations during the campaign period for the local elections, if they had any consideration for the basic rights protected by Korean law,” said Lee Dong-han, an official from the Citizens' Coalition for a Democratic Media (CCDM) (Kim 2006).

Although this opened the door for the government to begin implementing a new real name policy, it would be another two years before two more key events – a mass demonstration against US beef imports and the suicide of Korean movie star Choi Jin-sil – gave the government the opportunity it needed to dramatically expand the program.

US Beef Protests

The election of conservative Lee Myung-bak was not greeted warmly by the youthful, reform minded Internet crowd, creating a testy relationship between the Lee administration and young South Korean citizens from the very beginning of his term. The US beef protests were at once a demonstration of contempt for Lee's decision to end a 5-year ban on US imports and a general condemnation of the Lee administration by young South Koreans.

An online movement to impeach Lee had already been under way since early 2008 (Kim 2008), but the beef scandal worked synergistically with the impeachment movement. Many felt Lee's decision dismissed serious concerns related to mad cow disease. At the peak of demonstrations in early June there were more than 100,000 people on the streets, the majority of them teenage girls, whose candlelight vigils became the symbol of protest (Yoo 2008).

Many media platforms focused on misinformation that circulated anonymously in the country's leading discussion forums. A *Korea Times* reporter noted, for example:

The online frenzy was initiated last month, when anonymous messages were spread on mobile phones and on Internet sites, which said that a victim of mad cow disease had been found in Korea. Some other online rumors claimed that mad cow disease could be contracted through tap water or the air or via kissing. Scientists have rubbished these rumors but nevertheless many students came out to street rallies holding pickets that read “I'm only 15 and I don't want to die now,” for example. (Cho 2008)

Interestingly, it was a news report produced by private broadcaster MBC that initially made the claim that Koreans were much more likely to get a fatal form of mad cow disease. Two state officials, then Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun and Min Dong-seok, one of the chief negotiators in the beef import deal, filed suit against workers at the station for defamation and for exaggerating the threat. The court, however, found in MBC's favor:

“Although there were some exaggerations or errors in translation, it is hard to say they deliberately distorted the facts related to the threat of the disease,” Judge Mun Sung-gwan said in his ruling (Park 2010).

Choi Jin-sil Suicide

One of Korea's leading actresses, Choi Jin-sil, hung herself in October 2, 2008 after false rumors had spread that she was a loan shark and had driven another actor to suicide. Choi's suicide brought the issue of cyber-bullying very much to the forefront of public consciousness, but it was not the first (Glionna 2010). A number of other celebrities had committed suicide after similar incidents of online cyber-bullying. The Korean singer Yini, for example, committed suicide after online rumors that she had had plastic surgery, and two others after rumors spread about their sexuality (Fish 2009).

The government used this moment to call attention to its own statistics showing a rapid increase in cyber violence. In 2007 alone, the Korean government registered more than 200,000 cases of "cyber-violence", with many deaths resulting from suicide. The high concentration of public online discourse among a very small number of dominant sites (Naver and Daum), combined with the Korean sense of social shame, appeared to amplify the negative impact.

Real Name: Phase 2

Speaking in front of the National Assembly, Lee called the beef protests and the attacks on Choi signs of an "infodemic" requiring urgent government action. Rumor, misinformation and emotional attacks were surging under the cloak of the anonymous Internet user, he argued. Using the events as justification, the Lee administration instituted a range of new requirements for the use of real names (Fish 2009).

The new policy dramatically expanded the number of sites required to participate. While previously only Internet news sites with more than 200K users and web sites with more than 300K users were required to use real names, now all sites with more than 100K users who displayed user generated content of any kind would be required to register their real names (Kim 2009).

The expanded real name policy ran into stiff resistance from international web properties and from Google-Youtube in particular. Youtube's response to the new South Korean policy was to shut down commenting entirely rather than comply with the government order (Williams 2009). South Korean users got around these restrictions by logging on to foreign versions of Youtube and posting comments there. In addition, midsize Korean sites reacted strongly to this expansion of the real name requirement and began to circumvent these restrictions by piggybacking onto the comment systems of social network sites like Facebook. Because of the widespread distaste for the new regulations among foreign Internet firms, the Korean government announced that real name requirements would not apply to them (Koo 2011).

A survey by the Korean Communication Commission and the National Internet Development Agency of Korea from June to August of 2007 found that, in sites that had already implemented a real name system, slanderous messages were reduced from 15.8 percent to 13.9 percent and comments characterized as highly libelous from 8.9 to 6.7 per cent (Kim 2008). A more recent study at Carnegie Mellon had similar results, but stressed that the majority of online troublemakers continued their behavior even after registering their real names (Cho 2011). Boors and churls have existed in the real world for thousands of years without anonymity, so this really should be no surprise. The most significant factor to increase politeness was time online. Experienced contributors to forums were six times less likely to flame than those who rarely participated (Rosenbach and Schmundt 2011). Anonymity, then, appears not to be as critical a factor in politeness as is often thought.

Real Name is Dead. Long Live Real Name

Over the past year, the Korean government has slowly pulled back from its real name policy, even as the practice of using real names in social networks has grown. In early 2011, the Korean government announced that social networking sites would be exempt from the real name policy (Koo 2011). In July, the Cyworld social networking website and the Nate web portal were hacked, exposing the personal information of more than 35 million account holders (BBC 2011). According to an August 2011 report in the *China Daily*, the incident has pushed the government to institute new regulations to protect real information and abandon the real name policy altogether (China Daily 2011). In the meantime, Cyworld has been losing ground to Facebook, which has its own real name policy. So even though the Korean policy may be sunsetting, the practice continues. There is growing evidence of a sizeable voluntary real name culture connected to Facebook and Twitter use now emerging in the country (Footman 2011).

One reason that this transition to a real name default appears to be moving quickly may be the tight connection between Koreans in the on and offline worlds. In Japan, net users often develop relationships with people that they never see offline, while in Korea there is a wide overlap (Ishii and Ogashara 2007). Since persistent real space connections do not afford anonymity, they may become less important in the online context.

Minerva

Another key incident marking the evolution of anonymity on the South Korean Internet was the emergence of a highly popular series of commentaries on the national and global economic situation by a mysterious blogger going by the name of Minerva. Minerva's online stature grew as a series of specific predictions about global economic events, beginning with the collapse of Lehman brothers and following with rapid depreciation of South Korean currency, came true.

Park Dae-jung, a part time freelancer at a telecom company and voice behind Minerva, had started the account for fun in March, 2008 at the popular Daum Agora forum. Daum was already part of the real name registration system policy that went into effect in 2005, but because it was not an Internet news site during an election period, Park was able to use a pseudonym with his commentaries and protect his true identity from the mass public that enthusiastically followed him. As both global and Korean economies continued to tank into 2009 and Minerva began to stoke public discontent with the government, the Korean government decided it had enough. It went to Daum to request the real name and home address of Minerva, and subsequently arrested him for violating a rarely used clause in telecommunications law which forbids "spreading false information with the intent of harming the public interest" (Schwartz 2009).

Park was charged with causing significant economic harm to the country. The state claimed a particularly strident posting in December led to dollar hoarding in the country, forcing them to inject more than \$2 billion in liquidity. The Seoul Central District Court found Park not guilty, and noted that even if some of the information he had disseminated was false, he was not aware of and "didn't intend to harm the public interest" (Park 2009).

It seems clear that if South Korea were to extend the full real name rule from its election law to general online communication, cases such as the Minerva incident, where a citizen with no elite credentials is able to establish authority based on his writing alone, would be much rarer. Park was not a big trader as he had led his audience to believe. If the public had known who he really was from the start, they might have dismissed his posts out of hand.

China

It is important, from the start, to disabuse the reader of the notion that the China Internet is somehow locked down and anonymity free, with every move and action of every individual reliably tracked and recorded. While it is true that China has just rolled out a major new 2nd generation national ID system complete with embedded RFID chips, the system is not as ubiquitous as one might think. The Chinese public has been very resistant to any blanket real name policy for web discourse. Highly popular Internet cafes, many of them still unlicensed, provide much opportunity for anonymity online (Liu 2009; Ding 2009; Hong and Huang 2005). Although the national government has tried to require the presentation and registration of the Chinese national ID card before using computers at Internet cafes, the policy has yet to take hold (Farrall and Herold 2011; Liang and Lu 2010; Chang and Chu 2009).

Real Name Resistance

In the fall of 2006, the Chinese government began discussions with members of the Internet Society of China (ISC), the industry association group which sets standards for and promotes online business, to develop a real name policy for blogging. When news of these plans reached the public, reaction came swiftly, beginning with the publication of a detailed account of the meetings by one of China's most liberal newspapers, *Southern Weekend*. The paper challenged an ISC poll that suggested half of all Internet users supported the new policy, offering its own data showing Internet users were 3 to 1 against (Zhao 2006). After publication of this article, both the netizens at large and key figures in the private Internet industry publicly voiced their opposition to the government's real name policy for both moral and economic reasons.

Negative reactions from China's net-using public continued to make their way into mainstream media coverage. In early January, *China Youth Daily* published a national poll of 1,843 Internet users in which 83.5 per cent were opposed to the plan. A *People's Daily* article citing the CYD survey noted that citizens were in support of a similar policy for cell phones, since they understood its role in reducing fraud and cutting down on the scourge of SMS spamming. The article concluded with a clarification of the immanent ISC policy, noting that bloggers would still be free to choose online pseudonyms, and that "real identities will remain confidential and protected if they do nothing illegal or harmful to the public" (Xinhua News Agency 2007).

The combination of widespread public opposition and carefully reasoned legal arguments, exemplified by a *Liaoning Legal News* article, appeared to force the government to reconsider (Martinsen 2007). When the government-supported industry association Internet Society of China (ISC) released its "draft self discipline code" for bloggers in May, 2007, real name registration was listed as "encouraged" rather than mandatory (Chen 2007). That same spring, Chinese netizens would flex their political muscles, making it clear that anonymous communication could empower the public.

Xiamen PX Chemical Plant Protest

In the spring of 2007, citizens in the seaside city and special economic zone, Xiamen, began to become concerned over a new 11 billion yuan (USD\$1.4 billion) industrial project in the city's Haicang district designed to produce large amounts of xylene. Although the project had overwhelming support from the city government, citizens in Xiamen were able to make use of Internet bulletin boards, e-mail and short messaging services to organize a public protest of more than ten thousand people at the city center on June 1st and 2nd, leading to the temporary abandonment and eventual halting of the project there.

A few months after the protest, the city government announced draft rules banning anonymous Web postings for city residents (Dickie 2007). The move caused considerable controversy and reignited the debate over the seemingly shelved national policy requiring mainland Chinese bloggers to register their

real names. The move, however, appeared to be a unilateral action by the city government with no support from Beijing.

The Xiamen PX demonstration was perhaps less dependent on actual anonymity and more on perceived anonymity. Whether or not the initial organizers were truly anonymous as they began to send out the short messages and BBS notices that would help bring thousands to the streets, their perceived anonymity likely emboldened them to take the actions that quickly crystallized into a highly visible public. Those people who chose to take to the streets were videotaped and could easily be identified later, but the numbers being what they were, nothing much could be done.

Over the past couple of years, the Chinese government has continued to press for a real name system without much success. In the fall of 2010, government officials again announced real name registration for blogs would be instituted soon (Hicks 2010), but as of late fall 2011 nothing had changed. Recently, government officials announced that real names would soon be required for individual microblogger accounts (Chin 2011), of which there are more than 200 million. Early signs are that the government is more determined this time. Users of Sina Weibo, a leading microblog site, were reporting that they were being automatically registered with their real names, even when they had never provided their personal details to the site (Custer 2012).

Chinese Youth Interest in Anonymity

A 2007 poll by J. Walter Thompson showed a 2 to 1 greater interest in anonymity among Chinese youth than their American counterparts. Surprisingly, much of this interest is driven by what we might consider individual motivation. Since major urban economic reforms in the 1980s, children under China's one child policy have been getting a greater taste of personal space and individual identity. Internet anonymity affords experimentation with one's self identity:

More than twice as many Chinese respondents agreed that "I have experimented with how I present myself online" (69 percent vs. 28 percent of Americans). And in fact, more than half the Chinese sample (51 percent) said they have adopted a completely different persona in some of their online interactions, compared with only 17 percent of Americans. (IAC and JWT 2007)

Although there is considerable appreciation for the role that anonymity can play in society (at least among the young), there is a very healthy respect for the importance of accountability and reputation, and recognition that anonymity can add unacceptable risk to certain kinds of social transactions. The public, for example, seems to have responded positively to the opening of the national identity registry database. Accessible via cell phone short messaging service and the Web, anyone residing in China can log in with a person's name and ID number to verify their identity. If the ID matches the provided name, the database sends back a photo of the ID holder to help verify that the ID is held by the authorized user (Xinhua 2007).

Human Flesh Search Engine

In China, some forms of collective, anonymous behavior have distinct parallels with the South Korean cyber-bullying phenomenon that began with the dog poop girl incident. There have been a growing number of cases in which large crowds of Internet users mass together to punish what they believe to be a moral transgression. The seminal event is largely agreed to have been in early 2006, when a middle-aged woman began to upload videos of her killing kittens with her high heel shoe. Outrage over the video spread rapidly at mop.com, one of the most popular anonymous discussion forums.

Wang Jiao, a nurse living in a small town in northeastern China, was identified and her personal details circulated online within six days of her posting the video. Soon after, Wang was fired from her state job and had to flee to another town. This phenomenon, as it began to spread, began to become known as *Renrou Sousuo Yingqing* or Human Flesh Search Engine.

The nameless collective, with one shared goal, punish John Doe, can quickly pinpoint leaks of unique data, like a bridge in the distance or a particular hat, that allow them to identify and then rapidly share that information among all participants. Anonymity contributes not only to the quantity and variety of information, but also the tendency to move to extremes, since participation is detached from any personal accountability.

Whereas many South Koreans were horrified by what they saw as an imbalance between the punishment and the crime, many Chinese feel the woman got what she deserved. And although there have been subsequent cases where the reaction seemed extreme, these anonymous, collective actions have expanded to include more socially beneficial phenomenon, such as the outing of mid and low level corrupt politicians and locating missing or endangered individuals.

Rather than the public countenancing a renewed expansion of real name policies, Chinese HFSE participants appear to be developing their own norms in the hopes that they can rein in some of the more extreme, damaging events. Mop.com, for example, recently adopted a voluntary code of conduct:

According to the Code for the HFSE, netizens should try to avoid participating in “searching for others’ privacy” and should not “publish others’ privacy in public places”; however, using the HFSE to punish “corruption, embezzlement” and to “reward virtue and punish vice” (*cheng'e yangshan*) is not restricted (Wang 2010: 50).

There are obvious questions about how effective such a code might be, with new members coming in and out, and the lack of accountability under anonymity, but it is a start. The evolution of online codes of behavior, built from the grass roots rather than instituted from the top down, will be a rich area for academic research.

Conclusion

We have seen numerous examples of how online anonymity is valued in East Asian culture. In China, anonymity functions as a key resource for personal privacy, self-exploration, development and expression and as a driver of collective identity, norms and purpose. In Japan, level 1 anonymity can remove an important barrier to self expression and information flow, while level 2 anonymity can help keep social networks at the preferred small, more intimate scales. Although public commitment to online anonymity may be weakest in South Korea, even there it is strongly associated with open and unrestricted civic discourse.

It should be clear that we cannot explain the importance of anonymity in East Asia on the basis of its connection to affiliation and collective identity alone. Individual affordances are critical and in many contexts appear to be more highly valued. Public pressure against identification policies in all three countries – the JukiNet ID system in Japan, “real name” in China, and early public resistance to government real name policies in South Korea – was driven by personal privacy issues.

We must be careful not to take as given that anonymous online communication automatically leads to flaming and highly damaging hate speech. In pseudonymous communities which reward and punish behavior, like Slashdot and Digg, flaming is kept to a minimum. And even with complete anonymity, politeness often emerges as the rule, especially with time spent online (Cho 2011; Wang 2010). It is

possible that the rapid change in South Korean public sentiment following very public suicides, coupled with the government's ability to respond quickly with a real name policy, have actually stunted the growth of norms in South Korea that seem to be emerging in China and Japan.

Surprisingly, it appears that large, Western Internet firms like Google and Facebook may be more of a threat to online anonymity than any East Asian government policy. As their market shares in South Korea and Japan continue to expand, the default experience for a growing number of users in those countries will shift from pseudonymous to real name, without the necessity for any formal policy change by their respective governments.

Simply the perception of anonymity can dramatically affect the willingness of individuals to make certain types of statements. The Chinese government wants to implement a real name system in part because it can keep public discussion within desired limits. Political discourse and public sentiment will be more difficult to control if citizens believe they can express dissent without repercussion. While anonymity may be critical at certain early stages of the development of a political movement, participants may actively use their real names without fear once numbers reach a critical mass. When "problematic" voices reach a certain percentage of the population, simply being able to identify them is not enough. The masses can then exceed the numbers in which they are easily controlled, and force the government to accommodate them, as we saw in the case of the Xiamen PX demonstration.

Governments may also be interested in contexts in which the citizen believes they have anonymity, and carelessly leak details of their criminal plans. The Japanese police, for example, now regularly monitor 2chan for messages that might indicate a threat to the social order (Onishi 2004).

While anonymity indeed appears to be more important in the East than in the West today, the reasons for this remain to be elucidated by further research. It behooves Western policy makers to take note of the wide ranges of affordances for anonymity and to understand that its value in East Asia cannot simply be equated with a desire to blend in with the crowd.

As the world enters a period of increased political and social instability, as it begins to face seemingly insurmountable environmental, economic and cultural problems, it is critical that our public sphere has the greatest possible freedom to promote and vet the widest range of ideas. Government policies designed to restrict the distribution of anonymity will really only affect mainstream discourse, not the con artists and terrorists who operate at the margins, actors who have highly honed skills for achieving anonymity in even the most locked down environments. Though official arguments for widespread real name policies in the West are always couched in the desire for civility and the prevention of terrorism, their value in constraining the boundaries of discourse via state-guided peer pressure is likely the essence of their appeal. Eliminating the practice of anonymous discourse would constrain the production of information and cultural variety critical to the survival of the human species.

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