

Chapter 17

The World Narrow Web: Internet Content Regulation in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

The inauguration of the Lee Myung-Bak administration in 2008 signaled a crisis for Internet-driven participatory, democratic public culture in South Korea. One of the most visible effects was immediately found in the administration's repressive media policy. A series of anti-democratic regulations, grounded in both conservative and neo-liberal philosophies, was implemented to control and tame civic participation, public deliberation, and identity politics on the Internet. Firstly, in light of this, this chapter summarizes certain main debates regarding the role of the Internet in promoting or hindering democracy. Next, it takes up the recent spate of regulations regarding Internet content in Korea to shed critical light on how the Internet is reconfigured as a new site of cultural politics. Finally, it advocates anonymity as a constitutional free speech right and ascertains that anonymity in cyberspace contributes to, rather than impairs, the quality of public culture and democracy.

*The cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy (John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 1927, p. 240).*

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE CONTEXT

By many accounts, the Republic of Korea or South Korea (hereinafter, Korea) is considered

to be one of the most connected countries in the world, with over 90 percent of households served by broadband Internet connection. According to the International Telecommunication Union's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Development Index (IDI),¹ Korea was ranked third in the world as of 2008. Further, it was the only non-European country listed among the top ten countries (ITU, 2010). Korea has witnessed the emergence of new forms of civic, alternative media and online democracy over the past two decades

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-591-9.ch017

as a result of its highly advanced Internet and telecommunication infrastructure. This has indeed helped the relatively young Korean democracy to further progress toward a more substantive democracy.² The efflorescence of participatory, democratic Internet culture has thus taken various manifestations such as free speech portals, public knowledge sites, and online citizen journalism (e.g., *OhmyNews.com*, see Cheon, 2004).

However, the arrival of the new conservative Lee Myung-Bak government in 2008 has posed a serious challenge to the continual experimentation of online deliberative democracy in Korea. The new government has been trying to suppress the radical potentials of the Internet by implementing a series of anti-democratic Internet policies, including Internet Real Name Policy (IRNP). This is probably the most resisted kind of policy by netizens in Korea and abroad. This much debated and dubious policy mandates that users of major websites – those that have more than 100,000 visits per day – should register with their legal names and national resident registration numbers³ (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Not surprisingly, Reporters Without Borders (RWB) in its 2009 publication entitled *Internet Enemies*, listed Korea as a democracy under surveillance because of its “some disproportionate measures to regulate the Net” (p. 2). The same organization’s international rankings of press freedom for Korea have dropped sharply from the 39th position in 2007 to the 47th and 69th positions in 2008 and 2009, respectively (Press Freedom Index, 2007, 2008, and 2009). Notwithstanding its world leader status in Internet penetration, the OpenNet Initiative (2007) observes, “[Korean] citizens do not have access to a free and unfiltered Internet. The state imposes a substantial level of filtering for a free and democratic society. It requires ISPs to block sites on government lists and fosters a culture of self-censorship....” via ambiguous and questionable laws (p. 4).

Under the conservative political regime, Korean Internet is now reduced to a narrowly

defined and politically sanitized space of daily entertainment media only for celebrity/political gossip, gaming, dating, social networking, gambling, etc., while it is regulated exclusively from an economic point of view as a new engine for elevating Korea as a global information technology powerhouse in the post-Fordist global economy. In fact, this alleged “compressed economic development model” had been used as an ideological and moral justification for the suppression of citizen resistance and democratic values during Korea’s rapid, yet questionable economic development after the Korean War (Nam, 2008). Consequently, Internet regulation and policy are now being reconfigured into two noticeable directions. On the one hand, legal and economic restrictions are being loosened for the sake of telecommunication market deregulation. Alternatively, on the other hand Internet content regulation is being tightened to control democratic participation and civic resistance. Currently, the regulatory framework and language overtly attempt to separate between the political, the cultural, and the economic parameters. Thus, the Korean citizens’ identities are increasingly confined to consuming subjects, while not being allowed to use the Internet as a political space to act against the present government’s anti-democratic impulses.

Appalled by this unjustifiable retreat from democracy, citizens and media activist groups have expressed strong opposition to the current administration’s Internet policy. Undeniably, the Internet has become a new site of cultural politics and hegemonic struggle among the various governmental, regulatory agencies, civic organizations, netizens, and even domestic and global Internet powerhouses such as Google and YouTube Korea. It is within this context that this chapter aims to present a critique of the Lee government’s anti-democratic and shortsighted Internet regulation and policy. In so doing, it seeks to critically examine how the Internet is regulated as a politically sanitized public space in Korea, and to uncover the actual anti-democratic consequences of re-

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