

Online Collectivism, Individualism and Anonymity in East Asia

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Abstract: 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. Indeed, there appear to be growing questions about its continued viability within the digital environment in the age of terrorism. Will anonymity turn out to be a relic of the 20th century or does it have a future? As Gary Marx has noted, different contexts and value conflicts make it difficult to take an absolute position for or against anonymity. And while the basic idea is clear, a formal definition of anonymity remains elusive. There are 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. This paper 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. 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.

Although the primary subcultures of East Asia share a broad range of social values including Confucian collectivism, they have unique stories to tell about the role and importance of anonymity in their lives. China, perhaps, is the most surprising, where anonymity, and its affordance of experimentation with alternate online identities, is prized more highly among Chinese youth than their American counterparts. Chinese netizens have continued to push back successfully against PRC government policies to require real name registration for bloggers. In South Korea, public sentiment is more wary of anonymity, as it is seen to have facilitated extreme and inappropriate crowd behaviors leading to public shaming and a number of suicides. Disparate, nameless crowds combine bits and pieces of knowledge about a target to identify it, a curious case (known in China as the “Human Flesh Search Engine”) in which anonymity in one place can be used to extinguish anonymity in another. The Japanese seem to value anonymity for different reasons and are less social than the Koreans and Chinese. Their anonymous “2chan” web site was the inspiration for the West’s 4chan. Confucian collectivism expresses itself most as the desire to blend nameless into the crowd.

It is through increased understanding of global cultural contexts that we can better understand the critical role anonymity plays in social systems. Even within a region where collectivism rules over individuality, anonymity plays a surprisingly key role. We must be especially wary about assuming social systems might be better off, more secure, without it.¹

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

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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 are 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. This paper will 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 in the general region known as East Asia: China, South Korea, and Japan. 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. I will discuss Japan, South Korea and China each in turn before offering concluding thoughts. First, however, I review my approach to anonymity.

Although we commonly understand the concept from its lexical components, simply being “without a name,” the reality is more complex and uncertain. Different contexts and value conflicts make it difficult to take an absolute position for or against anonymity. Anonymity affords free speech and criticism of established power without fear of reprisal. Anonymity also inhibits accountability and thus weakens constraints on anti-social behavior. It is not easy to nail down, mathematically (Machanavajjhala et al., 2006; Li, Li & Venkatasubramanian, 2007), however, and can be highly elusive in the field as well (Sweeney, 2002; Ohm, 2009).

As a working heuristic, I consider anonymity across these cases based on two raw categories of motivation: *individual* and *collective*.² In addition to these basic motivations, I will distinguish between two levels: 1 (complete anonymity) and 2 (pseudonymity). In the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) literature, level 1 is often referred to as “lack of identifiability,” while level 2 is called “disassociation of real and online identity” (Azechi, 2005).³ It is common wisdom within the West that one of the defining characteristics of Eastern culture is the importance of collectivism over individualism. Further, it is often assumed that the penchant for emphasizing collective and societal needs over that of the individual 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 in each country, and for reasons that are often surprising.

There are two possible translations of “anonymity” into Chinese: *wuming* and *niming* (Hertz, 2001). We can think of *wuming* as collective and *niming* as individual anonymity. *Wuming*, or “without a name, refers more to nameless individuals who subsume themselves to a larger group or mass, whose individual names become irrelevant in the face of the larger identity of which

² I want to make clear I understand that this is a dramatic oversimplification. Gary Marx (2001), for example, has identified 15 distinct rationales for adopting anonymity.

³ It is also worth noting that there will occasionally, but not always, be moments where normative categorizations (the anonymity effect is good or bad) are uncontroversial. For example, when a famous South Korean actress is bullied to the point of suicide for information that turns out to have no basis in fact, most would agree this is a negative public outcome. In other cases, normative classification is much more elusive. While some may consider much of the irreverent and bawdy discourse on Japan’s 2chan bulletin board as having no redeeming value and thus negative, one might argue that it affords the release of social tensions keeps more serious, social stability threatening behaviors from have an opportunity to percolate into the environment. And when a Chinese woman who has just uploaded videos of her brutally killing cats is identified, humiliated, and forced out of her job and out of town, there is considerable disagreement as to whether the punishment was just or extreme.

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 impute to online anonymity in the West (Nissenbaum, 1999).

Morio & Bucholz (2009) argue that in Eastern cultures such as Japan, motives for interpersonal communication are based on *affiliation* with the group, while in western countries the motive is for *autonomy*. Although this point itself is unremarkable, and reflects a common view of Eastern and Western culture, Morio & Bucholz go further to argue that anonymity affords affiliation and discourages autonomy:

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) (7).

In more individually motivated cases, however, anonymity is more about protecting and actively concealing a developed individual identity from possible repercussions, to maintain a kind of unreachability and unaccountability that facilitate personal experimentation and release at the margins of social acceptability. Anonymity can provide for the stability, development and self-determination of the individual. As we will see in these cases below, individual and collective motivations can be highly intertwined.

Japan

The Japanese Internet culture makes use of anonymity at levels among the highest in the world (Ishii, 2008; Buchholz & Cross, 2007). Although blogging and social networking are popular activities, they tend to be conducted using level 2 anonymity (pseudonyms). Social network users make heavy use of anime type avatars instead of their own pictures, and when they upload images of themselves or friends, the faces are usually blurred. This has not always been the case, in the early years of popular social networking site Mixi, for example, people used their real names. Users quickly felt they were losing control over their relationships, being bothered by people when they would rather be left alone. Users began to lock their profiles and hide behind avatars (Alabaster, 2008). In Japan today, the vast majority of online exchanges occur between people who have never or likely will never meet in the physical world, and who do not even know the physical identities of their counterparts (Ishii, 2008).

It is important to point out that 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. The Internet 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 seem to agree (Austin, 2011).

2chan

In addition to level 2 anonymous communication, there is also a large domain of level 1, fully anonymous communication in Japanese cyberspace, especially at 2chan, Japan's highly popular, unfiltered anonymous bulletin board. 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 the average Japan citizen 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), it has become a veritable social force that commands public attention. 2chan has been criticized for its lack of morality, 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 Nishimura's 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" (Nishimura, quoted in Furukawa, 2003).

2chan can be a place to find real news and information that is censored or ignored by the mainstream media. Occasionally, stories that first appear on 2chan are picked up and run by traditional media (Furukawa, 2003). Its messages are regularly monitored by the police for any evidence of impending violence or terrorism.

This phenomenon of anonymous information sharing affords certain forms of distributed cognition and collective action that can be highly efficient and quick forming. The 2chan environment has supported the rapid formation of online groups that engage in positive social action, such as providing relief to victims of the October 2004 Niigata Prefecture Chuetsu earthquake, or the rapid generation and generation and delivery of more than 800,000 paper thousand to the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Memorial to replace the thousand cranes that had been destroyed by fire. In this context, it is important to recognize that anonymity is often less about concealing ones individual identity and more about surrendering ones personal identity to that of the group. This is the "affiliation" motivation that Morio & 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).

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 much of a political threat to the government. Why the Internet appears as less a political threat in Japan, than in China or South Korea, is in part based on its unique historical development and the reputation of the virtual world as a den of iniquity, rumor mill, and domain of excess. A long standing Japanese election law prohibits Japanese candidates from making use the Internet for campaigning in the 12 days prior to an election. The political significance of the Internet is much lower compared to SK and China. Even with the surprise election of the DPJ in 2009, studies suggest that traditional media, especially television, were the primary channels for the DPJ victory (McCargo & Lee, 2010).

South Korea

South Korea has an extensive national ID system, one that has been in place since General Park's oppressive military regime made ID s 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 both fixed PC and mobile devices, with the highest average bandwidth in the world. 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 in that 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 Ilbo* 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.

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, under the assumption that it would increase civility. 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 gets on the subway with her small dog, which proceeds to do its business on the floor of the subway car. On looking passengers ask her to clean up the mess. The woman rudely refuses and then leaves the subway with her dog at the next stop. Unbeknownst to the woman, one of the passengers has taken cell phone pictures. Hours later, the woman's photo and a narrative of her transgressions appear online and rapidly spread across the blogosphere. An online mass of people, united by their disgust with the woman's behavior, launch a campaign to identify and punish her. As the woman's normal life becomes shattered by near constant harassment, she is forced to leave her university in disgrace.

A spirited debate ensued, both within Korea and all over the world, over whether the reaction against the woman's behavior was justified. Many argued that the excessiveness of personal attacks crossed the line and were themselves infringement on human rights. Many of 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 "Korea cyber lynch mob" ("Trial by Internet' casts spotlight on Korean Cyber Mobs," July 8, 2005). The incident and the mainstream media spin helped to spark a change in the public's attitude toward the use of real names online, with more than 75 percent 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 with the election in period in the spring of 2006. The Korean National Election Commission ordered Internet news websites to require that all users 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 the May 31 local 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, pgraph 14).

Though this opened the initial window for the government to begin implementing a new real name policy, it would be another two years before two more key events would give the government the moment it needed to dramatically expand the program: a mass demonstration against U.S. beef imports and the suicide of Korean movie star Choi jin-sil.

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 public registration of contempt for Lee's decision to resume importing US beef that had been banned since a mad cow scare in 2003, and a general condemnation of the Lee administration by young South Koreans.

An online movement to impeach him had already been under way early in 2008 (Kim Rahm, 2008), but the beef scandal worked synergistically with the impeachment movement. 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. Many media platforms highlighted the misinformation that circulated anonymously in the country's leading discussion forums. For example, this summary from the *Korea Times*:

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).⁴

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 after she had hounded him to pay off his debts. 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 rapid increase in cyber violence. In 2007 alone, more than 200,000 cases of "cyber-violence" were registered by the Korean government, with many deaths resulting from suicide. The high concentration of public online

⁴ 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. 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 of mad cow. 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. "As the program criticized the resumption of imports of U.S. beef, based on expert opinion and research results, it cannot be considered to have caused harm to the reputation of the officials." (Park, 2010)

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 to put right. Rumor, misinformation and emotional attacks were surging under the cloak of the anonymous Internet user. 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.

The expanded real name policy quickly ran into stiff resistance from international web properties and with Google-Youtube in particular. Youtube’s response to the new South Korean policy was to shut down commenting entirely rather than comply (Williams, 2009). South Korean users could and did get around these restrictions by logging on to foreign versions of Youtube and posting comments there. In addition, mid size Korean sites reacted strongly to this expansion of the real name requirement and began to circumvent these government restrictions by piggybacking onto the comment systems of social network sites like Facebook (Koo, 2011). 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 foreign firms (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 slanderous messages were reduced from, on average 15.8 percent to 13.9 percent and comments characterized as libellous to a high degree from 8.9 to 6.7 per cent in sites that had already implemented a real name system. (Kim, 2008) While this may either be within the range of error or register a small real effect on civility of discourse, the policy clearly does not have a magic bullet effect. Boors and churls have existed in the real world for thousands of years without anonymity so this should be no surprise.

Phase 3???

Just recently the Korean government has announced that social networking sites would be exempt from the real name policy (Koo, 2011). The delay in relaxing this policy for its domestic social networking sites such as Cyworld appears to have contributed to the loss of what just a few years ago appeared to be an insurmountable lead over Facebook. While it is possible to create and maintain a pseudonymous or even fully (level 1) anonymous web site on Facebook, the practice goes against widely shared group norms and Facebook’s own policy. So even though the Korean policy has lost relevance, their goals may have been at least partially met under the new Facebook regime. There is growing evidence of a sizeable voluntary real name culture connected to Facebook and Twitter use is 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 Korean 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

& 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 Japanese and global economies 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 it 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 enthusiastic ally followed him. As both global and Korean economies continue to tank into 2009 and Minerva's began to symbolize and further stoke public discontent with the government, the Korean government 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 forbid "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 to stabilize the situation. The Seoul Central District Court, which heard the case, found Park not guilty, finding that even if some 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 the their writing alone, would be much rarer. Park was not a big trader as he had led his audience to believe, and if the public had known who he really was from the start, they might have dismissed his posts out of hand. The assumption of public anonymity on the Daum forum was enough to both embolden Park and to allow for the public to project its own star identity onto him, as some white-hat hero from the financial elite who was giving the people the truth.

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 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, provided much opportunity for anonymity online. 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 & Herold, 2011, Farrall, 2009). 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, n.p.). With 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 imminent 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* article⁵ appeared to force the government to reconsider. 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

⁵ The *Liaoning Legal News* article, argued that the state in fact had no legal authority to compel Internet users to identify themselves and thus could not simply compel real name registration by way of ISC policy. The argument referred to the text of the 2003 National ID law in which only 4 specific instances are listed where ID presentation is legally compelled. The 5th instance would require the passage of a national law. As a result, not only real name policies for blogs, but those for online gaming and mobile phones, had no legal basis. In support of the policy's social utility, the article went on to recommend that such laws be passed, since law abiding citizens should have nothing to fear from exposing their identity to the state (Martinsen, 2007).

to send out the short messages and BBS notices that would help bring millions 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.

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 and the increase in available living space, 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 ("China leads the U.S.," Nov. 23, 2007, n.p.).

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 ("China provides," 2007). Angry Chinese blogger suggests that the reaction to the new system has been positive among a wide range of business owners such as hoteliers and store owners, but is marked by suspicion and concern within the "activist and industry insider" community ("Confirm a friend," 2006).

Human Flesh Search Engine

In China, the phenomenon known as the Human Flesh Search Engine has some 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 one of the most popular anonymous discussion forums: mop.com. Quickly, the individual, nameless netizens were coordinating a two phase response. First, to strip her of the anonymity she assumed she had by posting videos to the web. Second, once she was identified, to visit her with a social fury of disapproval. The woman, a nurse living in a small town in northeastern China was identified and her name, her phone number and her employer and physical address circulated by HFSE-ers within six days of her posting the video. Soon after, Wang Jiao 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 Yinqing* or Human Flesh Search Engine.

It is important to note that this term was in existence for years before the event. There was a channel at mop.com with the name, where questions regarding entertainment and trivia were posed for the group to try and answer. At the time, the term simply referred to a kind of cognitive crowd sourcing. The human flesh search engine was a search by human flesh, not for it (Downey, 2010). But since the kitten killing incident, HFSE is understood to be searching for and sometimes sanctioning individuals. 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 certainly been case since where the reaction clearly 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, (their boorish or thuggish behavior) and the location of missing or endangered individuals.

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 across all participants. The anonymity contributes to the quality of info but also the tendency to move to extremes, since it is detached from any personal accountability that tends to dampen extreme behavior. In China, a significant number of so called HFSs were political in nature, targeting provincial and lower level party hacks with boorish behavior or obvious signs of corruption. The national government has allowed these acts to continue as a social release valve of sorts, but would quickly change tack if it ever appeared a higher level politician was being targeted.

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. The popular HFSE forum 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, p. 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

While it is true that anonymity is difficult to define with any precision, it can be useful to think of social systems of having various distributions of "online anonymity resources." Governments, as a rule, tend to wish to diminish these resources, with the public showing varying degrees of resistance. One way of accomplishing such a reduction is the institution of a formal real name policy. In the "ideal" situation users would be unable to contribute to a discourse without definitively associating with their unique physical identity (rather than one of multiple virtual, mediated identities). The South Korean government has enforced this policy just prior to elections, but otherwise lets Internet users adopt pseudonyms and remain unreachable to the general public. While anonymity may be critical at certain stages of the development of a political movement, for example, once it reaches critical mass, participants may actively use their real names without fear, which then helps provide new incentives for contribution, such as

reputation and gratitude. Anonymity (level 2) can support the development of one's own identity while facilitating experimentation within error tolerant non-binding communication spaces. It is an opportunity for those outside traditional elite circles to quickly develop authority purely on the merit (or perceived merit) of their message.

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, who have highly honed skills for achieving anonymity in even the most locked down environments. Although it may reduce the amount of flaming and bullying to some degree (the small percent reduction cited by the South Korean government), it also will clearly reduce the "discursive variety" in mainstream social discourse, as people become less willing to "try on" controversial ideas and opinions. It is through increased understanding of global cultural contexts that we can better understand the critical role anonymity plays in social systems. Even within a region where collectivism rules over individuality, anonymity plays a surprisingly key role. We must be especially wary about assuming social systems might be better off, more secure, without it.

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