

Internet Activism in Asia-Pacific: A Comparative, Cultural History

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Abstract

As the internet has become a central delivery platform across contemporary mediascapes, activism around internet access, freedom, censorship, and openness has become more prominent. As internet freedom gathers momentum as a global media policy concept and movement, it is important to interrogate the terms in which it is constructed and understood. All too often, and certainly evident in these recent moves, is a strong, normative sense in which North American concepts of internet, media, activism and even ‘freedom’ shape the boundaries and modes of contemporary debates, policy frameworks, and action. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to reframe contemporary notions of internet freedom, their politics, publics, actors, and movements. Drawing from the wider project on Asia-Pacific internet histories, this paper presents three case studies of internet activism — respectively in Australia, South Korea, and Japan.

Keywords

internet activism; freedom; Asia-Pacific; cultural history

Introduction

As the internet has become a central delivery platform across contemporary mediascapes, activism around internet access, freedom, censorship, and openness has become more prominent. With the prominence of debates and dissent associated with the US SOPA/PIPA legislation in 2011-2012 (see Croeser 2012; O’Leary 2012; Yetgin et al 2012 for documentation of these movements), and attempts by various countries — notably China, Syria, Egypt, Burma, and Iran (Warf 2011; Ziccardi 2013), among many others — to shut down, control, or confine use of the technology, activism relating to the internet has moved centre stage (Croeser 2012).

This groundswell has seen terms coined such as ‘internet freedom’, ‘digital freedom’, and, a term with an older genealogy, the ‘digital liberties movement’ or DLM (Croeser 2012; Ziccardi 2013) as convenient, global terms to encapsulate struggles for the democratization of the internet. Efforts such as the OpenNet initiative provide monitoring on internet filtering and surveillance by nations (<https://opennet.net/>). The December 2012 International Telecommunications Union (ITU)’s World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT-12) saw a widely publicized backlash against proposed internet standards from a number of countries concerned with internet freedom, supported by Google. In March 2013, Representative Zoe Lofgren and three other Californian democrats introduced the *Global Free Internet Act* into Congress to create a taskforce to monitor policy threats internationally.

As internet freedom gathers momentum as a global media policy concept and movement, it is important to interrogate the terms in which it is constructed and understood. All too often, and certainly evident in these recent moves, is a strong, normative sense in which North American concepts of internet, media, activism and even ‘freedom’ shape the boundaries and modes of contemporary debates, policy frameworks, and action.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to reframe contemporary notions of internet freedom, their politics, publics, actors, and movements. It does so by an investigation of the histories of internet activism, stretching decades back to the 1960s and 1970s to the hacking and technological counterculture moments of that era (Ziccardi 2013, 73-123). Importantly, it takes a comparative, cultural historical approach to tracking the roots of internet activism, documenting, and analysing

these, and considering their significance for how we understand such activism focused on the internet today.

Drawing from the wider project on Asia-Pacific internet histories, this paper presents three case studies of internet activism — respectively in Australia, South Korea, and Japan. It considers questions such as: how were issues of freedom framed? how did activism for the internet develop in each country? How was it related to existing activist movements as well as key social and cultural identities and problematics? Was its emergence and characteristics related to particular infrastructures, internet cultures and histories, and specific cultural dialectics and social functions? How did strands of internet activism in each country relate to regional, international, and global internet activists movements?

The Australian case study retraces the history of internet censorship in the early 1990s, when Australian internet was becoming a public medium, and its adoption and use began to raise questions about its rich capacity for cultural expression and exchange – especially of previously difficult to obtain and distribution ideas, materials, and practices. It discusses the first legislation developed to regulate Internet content in the second half of the 1990s, and the activism that emerged in response to these Federal government moves. To some extent, the long recursive process of these legislative efforts went under the radar of much of the public, as well as many traditional media and freedom of speech activists. However, the growing concern about the creeping extension of internet censorship in Australia, heightened by outlawing of largely uncomprehended online fan practices (McLelland 2010) as well as anti-terror legislation, exploded onto the national stage with the election of the Rudd Labor government in 2007, and its Internet ‘clean feed’ proposal. We discuss the development of this piece of policy, and the broad range of activism that occurred in response, leading to its eventual demise. Finally, we discuss the Australian responses to the SOPA/PIPA legislation, which, although US-based, also generated mainstream opposition and creative activism in Australia also.

In the Japanese case study, we explore critical points in Japan’s internet history that involve unsuccessful attempts by various government administrations to play an active role in controlling internet content in Japan. Japan’s experience with freedom of speech on the internet demonstrates the difficulties of regulating online content. Despite the fact that freedom of speech is explicitly guaranteed in the Japanese Constitution, the mainstream media have been largely governed by self-imposed ethical codes regulating content. However, unlike traditional media formats such as television and newspapers, often communications through the internet are not edited or mediated. Thus, while the internet has expanded in Japan over the past two decades, it has also invited character defamation, identity theft, hate speech, racism, and ultra relativism.

In particular, we discuss the case of the the popular 2-channel (2ch) bulletin board service (BBS) started to collect IP addresses after a “bus-jacking” incident was publicized through the BBS. However, this control mechanism was thwarted by users who signed their postings using the moniker “anonymous.” The second case we explore is the period immediately following the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami in East Japan, when calls for regulating internet content increased. According to Chiyohara (2012), on March 17, 2011, the National Police Agency (NPA) announced its requirement for ISPs to monitor server content for rumors concerning the Fukushima Dai’ichi nuclear situation. However, what exactly constituted the definition of such rumors was neither identified nor clarified, resulting in widespread criticism of the NPA and the government for potentially suppressing “irresponsible” stories about Fukushima on the internet.

The South Korea case study discusses the autonomous activities of Internet users to counter both the bureaucracy’s desire of social control and business interests spoiling the commons. Specifically, it explores how Internet users and civil rights groups joined together since late 1990s to construct a widespread network of resistance against the desire of control and privatization on the Internet. In Korea, Internet users’ counteractivities were spontaneous and voluntarily interconnected with or without any help from the civil rights movement. The widespread resistance of Internet users to the government’s policies such as the Internet Real Name System, online censorship, and the rigid copyright system transformed into a united front with civil rights groups against the dominant power

systems. The focus in this case study is on the context and the chronology of events and issues, especially since the early 2000s that have led to the rise and spread of e-resistance in Korea.

In the final section of the paper, we compare and contrast the three cases of internet activism. We draw findings from these quite distinct cases in the Asia-Pacific, and their historical contexts, and contrast them with the dominant imaginary of activism for internet freedom in the United States context that so powerfully influences the terms of resistance in contemporary movements for internet freedom.

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