

UNDERSTANDING CYBER-DEMOCRACY WITH THE CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an application of the Critical Social Theory (CST) in understanding cyberspace behavior. CST can be used as a qualitative methodology in IS research. Most prior IS research utilized a very narrowly drawn insight from CST without historical and social context considered. This study tries to apply a general concept of CST for the purpose of providing a plausible explanation for cyberspace behavior. In this paper, a cyberspace behavior case of a relatively developed country where the Confucius tradition dictating people's physical world behavior is defied in cyberspace is investigated. This case deals with unexpected ignoring of cultural protocol such as showing respect to authorities in government cyberspace. Empirical data were collected and the result shows that people were able to overcome the Confucius psychological barrier in government cyberspace. This phenomenon shows people's ability to do critical reflection that led them to emancipation in cyberspace. This paper shows that a general CST can be adopted for an IS research method tackling topics relevant to cyberspace behavior.

Keywords: critical social theory, cyber-democracy, IS research method, cyberspace behavior

INTRODUCTION

CST theorists strive to achieve a general goal that is to expose unjust conditions of the society and bring about the emancipation of people. Namely, they believe that modern societies (including developed nations) lack complete emancipation of people due to existing unjust conditions. In relation to information system research, Lyytinen and Klein [8] first proposed a possibility of utilizing Habermas' theory, which was one of CST theorists' concepts in information system research. Later Hirschheim and Klein [6] developed an information system development paradigm based on emancipatory CST concepts. However there has been only one study [10] that was based on empirical data analysis while utilizing CST. By analyzing discourse data between system analysts the researchers exposed the occasions of critical reflection to remove distortion in information exchange, which then was considered as expanding media richness of e-mail. The CST theory that they utilized was Habermas' theory of communicative action [5]. Habermas' theory of communicative action explains four types of social action: (a) instrumental, (b) communicative, (c) discursive, and (d) strategic. Habermas suggested that, while performing these social actions, humans can be critical of validity associated with the information being disseminated through

communication. Thus humans are capable of critical reflection, which can lead to detecting distorted communication such as false, incomplete, manipulative, and insincere information being transmitted to them, thereby emancipating themselves from those mental pollutants.

Due to this useful insight on human communication, IS scholars adopted the theory of communicative action as the tool to understand otherwise unseen phenomenon during information system development. However, the theory of communicative action should be understood much more broadly than just the critical reflections occurring in the minds of system developers. That is, critical reflection ought to be more fundamental and general such that emancipation would happen in many dimensional ways. Removing distorted information for system development is just one dimension of emancipation; general emancipation should happen to the system developer in terms of his/her social/political/spiritual awareness or enlightenment.

In short, there are two possibilities of application of CST in IS research:

1. A narrowly-drawn CST concept such as theory of communicative action can be applied for research in information system development.
2. A general CST concept is to expose unjust conditions of society and lead the way to the emancipation of people. This view can be applied for research in cyberspace behavior, since cyberspace provides a field for human beings to experiment and challenge the norm of behavior of the society as well as a venue to generate the false feeling of emancipation due to the virtual nature of cyberspace.

We observed cyberspace behavior of people in South Korea, whose national IT infrastructure is highly developed. The IT infrastructure is important because cyberspace behavior can materialize when people are provided with high-speed Internet connections at an affordable price. Korea has been recognized worldwide as one of a few nations with a highly developed information technology and Internet infrastructure. Korea ranks first in terms of high-speed Internet usage, with approximately 21% of the population subscribing to high-speed Internet [9]. More than 10 million users subscribe to high-speed Internet services via such means as ADSL, VDSL, community LAN, and satellite. Therefore, Korea is an appropriate target of research on cyberspace behavior.

CASE OF CYBER-DEMOCRACY

Economic prosperity gives people freedom and power to challenge the status quo of a current political regime, which is usually a one-party or one-person dictatorship. Rising middle class demanded a government that could listen to their voice and accept sharing of power. As economy grows, the size of middle class and their power do too, which ultimately wins the democratic rule.

In the past decade we saw the information technology revolution which transformed people's lives completely. With the help of information technology, democratic and affluent countries started to implement systems that could be used for enhancing democracy. These countries have long-standing traditions of maintaining democratic governments. However the problem of political apathy and under-representation of popular will still persists. For example, the voter turnout for US congressional elections is often less than 50 percents, which implies a serious problem of apathy for the democratic political process [3]. In order to alleviate the political apathy, many governments implemented cyber-governments (i.e., web pages) to enable citizens to voice their feedback on public policy and participate in political processes [4].

Even though the use of cyberspace seems facilitating for democracy, there is no concrete evidence in affluent countries to confirm the benefit of cyber-democracy. Since affluent countries already have high levels of citizen participation, except for efficiency aspect of cyber-democracy, it is not clear what kind of contribution the new IT-enabled political system makes. We would like to posit that a nation with a short history of democracy should be an ideal example to examine the effect of cyber-democracy. A newly-developed country which achieved democracy recently and also happened to have strong national IT infrastructure can reveal the benefit of IT-enabled political processes because the nation does not have "built-in" participatory democratic tradition. South Korea belongs to this new group of countries where economic development and inevitable democratization were realized in the last decade or so. It has been only 12 years since democratically elected civilian government took power in the nation's history. Due to the past three decades of economic development, South Korea is able to provide many services and goods of the world-class level. Among them, national IT infrastructure is one of the best in the world. With the highly-developed IT infrastructure the government wanted to foster citizen participation into the political process through cyber-government projects which involved creation of web pages where citizens could voice their opinions on government affairs and lodge their complaints electronically. Since the national government-based cyber-democracy projects can be too broad-focused to show any evidence of the benefit of cyber-democracy, we introduce a local government cyberspace of city of Seoul. Seoul is the capital of South Korea and has more than 10 million inhabitants who have numerous specific complaints on city administration. During the dark days of military dictatorship of the past, the city government of Seoul was run by an appointed mayor who had no real interest in being responsive to citizens' opinions and complaints. However, ever since the successful transition to democratic rule, the mayoral position has been filled with a person who was elected by people. Thus the elected mayor has a genuine interest in being responsive to citizens' concerns. The city has decided to construct elaborate layers of web pages which could be used to receive citizens' complaints, opinions, and

request to process paper works electronically [1]. We have investigated a bulletin board in a form of the web page where citizens can lodge complaints against the city government. In this web page, people make a complaint on very specific matter such as garbage collection, taxi service, traffic control, etc. We read more than 100 complaints available for public display in the web page in order to determine the effect of using cyberspace for citizens to express their opinions. We also conducted a cyberspace survey with people who had experience of lodging complaints in the web page of government for the purpose of testing our hypothesis that in cyberspace, people overcome the Confucius psychological barrier of expressing signs of “respect” while they write their concerns to the government officials. As Lee [7] has indicated, Koreans are heavily influenced by the Confucian culture which emphasized the respect to elders and seniors in the social hierarchy.

Koreans are concerned about being not respectful enough when they use e-mail to convey their messages to their seniors especially in workplaces [7]. This behavior must be an obstacle to practicing the democratic political process which requires healthy criticism of authority figures. The Confucian tradition combined with long authoritarian rule left Korean people cowardly. From a general CST point of view, Korean people have been suffering under the unjust condition where any disrespectful attitude toward seniors and authorities were punished either implicitly or sometimes violently. Korean people mechanically observed the protocol of paying respect to seniors and authorities regardless of their backgrounds. However after examining the contents of complaints, we found that people were not very concerned with showing respect in their postings in the web page. They were only interested in conveying their messages as they were. In other words, people can be liberated from the cultural norm which functions as a mental pollutant and focus on transmitting their message. This cyberspace behavior which contradicts real life can be regarded as the sign of a possible solution that might lead Korean people to emancipation. This emancipation is more of an enlightenment of the human spirit in many dimensions including political, social, and historical, rather than just a correction of the meaning of a message exchanged during information system development (as suggested by Ngwenyama and Lee [10]). Korean people behaved without fear of offending authorities in cyberspace even though the possibility is still there. At least in cyberspace a degree of emancipation was achieved, although it is to be seen if their cyberspace experience will alter their real life behavior. In order to confirm this emancipatory phenomenon empirically, we conducted a survey.

An Empirical Investigation

We particularly investigated a bulletin board in the form of the web page which contained complaints to the mayor section. People lodged diverse but very specific concerns to the mayor,

which incidentally, contains no decorative phrases to show respect, i.e., they were not worried about being considered as disrespectful, but only interested in writing their problems as clearly as possible. This attitude was a complete reversal of the behavior found in previous research [7]. We analyzed 103 postings from different individuals, classifying those postings into two groups according to the following criterion: The content of a posting has any heading before its main body that contains “respectful” phrases such as “Dear Sir:”, “How are you sir?”, “I appreciate what you are doing for us.”, “I am sorry to bother you.”, etc.. Surprisingly majority of postings did not contain any decorative heading to express “respect” that is the norm in the Confucius tradition (Table 1).

Table 1. Grouping of Postings

Postings with no “respect” phrases = 87 Postings with “respect” phrases =16

We theorized that people would find the web page bulletin board more “emancipatory” compared to sending an individual e-mail to the government official where the Karma of “show respect” haunts them. Thus we proposed a following hypothesis.

H1: Posting a message on a bulletin board of the government web page allows people to break out of the Confucius psychological barrier that they need to show respect.

In order to determine if this result is only a coincident or not, we conducted a cyberspace survey with the following questionnaire:

Background: Please answer the following questions if you have ever posted a message directed at government officials in a government web page bulletin board with your real name.

Q1: Does the format of a bulletin board in the government web page instead of individual e-mails encourage you posting on the government web page? a) yes b) no

Q1: When you posted your message, did you think that you needed to show respect to the relevant government officials in your message? a) strongly agree b) agree c) disagree d) strongly disagree

This survey questionnaire was published as a web page listed in various Korean search engines and directories and had been on-line for six months from 12/2002-05/2003. Since no demographic questions were asked in order to make the survey as short as possible, the characteristics of subjects is only known as people who posted a message to a government web page bulletin board with their real name (most government web pages require the usage of real names to prevent unwelcome pranks). However for our purpose of determining what caused the break-up of the Confucius psychological barrier, demographic information is not deemed to be necessary. 125 people responded to the cyberspace survey. Table 2 shows the result of the survey.

Table 2. Message Poster Survey Result

	Group: Yes to "web page"	Group: No to "web page"
Means	3.9	1.2
Number of Subjects	101	24

We classified the subjects into two groups based on the answer to the first question. That is, those who answered YES (101 subjects) and those who answered NO (24 subjects) to the first question. Then the average numeric value of answers to the second question was calculated according to group. Finally, Comparison of Means of two groups using SAS software was conducted. The statistical test showed that H1 was accepted with p -value < 0.05 . In other words, we have empirical evidence that people of South Korea can be “emancipated” from the burdens of the Confucius practice of “show respect” at least in cyberspace where the form of expression is a bulletin board of a web page. Since the content of messages posted in the mayoral section of the City of Seoul can be regarded as the content of a letter or an e-mail, the format must have made a significant difference in making people brave. The survey result confirms it. Figure 1 describes the process of the application of a general CST for this case.

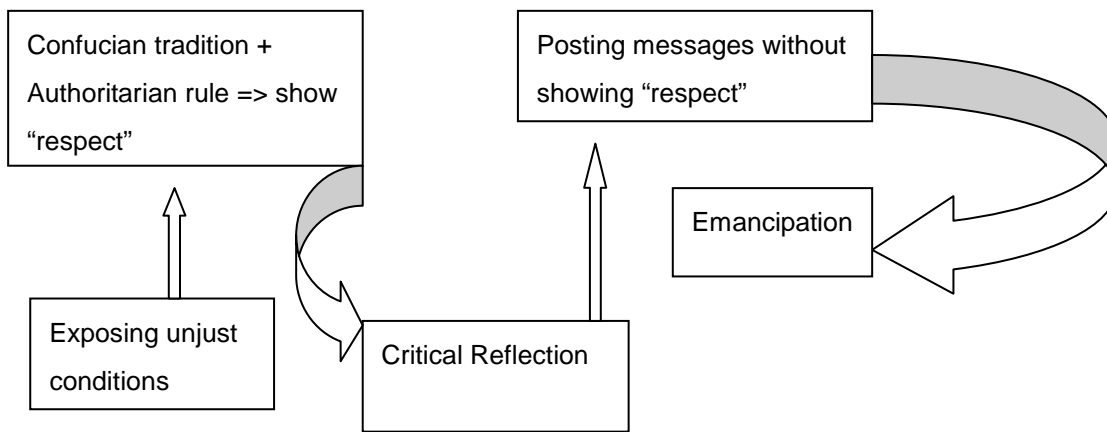


Figure 1. Process of a General CST Application

Meaning of the Result

How can people be ignorant of the tenacious barrier of “show respect” tradition when they write on a bulletin board web page? Writing to a space in a web page seems not regarded as the same as an email letter to the authority. It takes the burden of cultural influence out of people’s mind. A good reason for people’s behavior can be that people look at others’ postings, which influence their own behavior. In the bulletin board web page, citizens can read other people’s postings

where no decorative words to express respect are used and get encouraged to do the same. In a CST term, people went through critical reflection on their usual perspective on the universe by observing what others have done. They were able to question the validity of the holy grail of the oppressive and unjust society. They then emancipated themselves from a thousand-year shackle that ruled their everyday existence. The case study of City of Seoul web pages exhibits the evidence that use of cyberspace can in fact enhance the democratic political process by emancipating people, which was not obvious in traditionally democratic nations.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrated that a general CST in contrast with the existing CST application could be adopted for an IS research method using an empirical study of a case. In this case, a study of City of Seoul web pages provided the evidence that use of cyberspace might facilitate emancipation of people who were concerned with showing respect when they communicated with seniors and authorities. A general CST is shown as a relevant application area of CST in cyberspace behavior research among IS topics.

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