Power struggles in Korean cyberspace and Korean cyber asylum seekers

Dong-Hyun Song
Goldsmiths, University of London

ABSTRACT
This paper is part of a larger project to re-evaluate the 2008 Korean Candle Light Demonstrations and their aftermath by focusing on the activities of Korean internet users following the demonstrations. The unprecedented ability of ordinary citizens to organise themselves through online communication during the demonstrations led the South Korean government to plan new policies designed to gain control of cyberspace. They arrested famous, anti-government netizens and accused them of disseminating false information. Korean web portals followed the government’s request to delete anti-government postings from their websites and even handed over personal information about their users. While these oppressive measures worked to muzzle Korean internet users temporarily, the limitations of domestic internet regulation were revealed when global corporations, such as Google and YouTube, refused to comply with the restrictions. As a consequence, Korean internet users abandoned Korean-based portals for US or globally-based service providers in a mass movement known as the ‘Korean Cyber Asylum Seekers Project’. This paper explores how these Korean internet users opened up a new landscape in Korean cyberspace and exposed the hypocrisy of the power holders in Korean society.
KEY WORDS
2008 Candle Light Demonstrations; internet governance; mobilization; cyber asylum seekers

INTRODUCTION
This paper will explore the aftermath of the 2008 ‘Candle Light Demonstrations’ in relation to South Korean cyberspace. These Demonstrations were the most significant expression of popular discontent against government policies in South Korea after the re-introduction of democratic government in 1987. They were also the first mass demonstrations in which internet-mediated organisation played a key role, and therefore prompted the imposition of a series of repressive internet regulations by the Korean government. Some scholars engaged in the discourse of internet regulation (Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Hague and Loader 1999) view cyberspace as a battlefield between the public and governments. Similarly, studies relating to the aftermath of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations mostly focus on internet governance, but in doing so they neglect one highly significant aspect of the Korean-language internet. More than 80% of Korean internet users use Korean web portals such as Naver or Daum as gateways to access the internet (KoreanClick 2009). Critical discourse has so far failed to consider this particular characteristic of Korean internet culture despite the fact that it became an issue following the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations. Once the South Korean government realized the political significance of cyberspace and attempted to regulate it, these Korean web portals, along with regular internet users, became a central object of the government’s attempts to gain control of the online sphere.

For this reason, the aftermath of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations provides an important example for the study of internet governance, and this paper will examine how the Korean state tried to control cyberspace through the implementation of new policies.
Power struggles in Korean cyberspace

following the 2008 Demonstrations. However, the reactions of both the web portals and ordinary internet users are also significant, especially in moving debate beyond the issue of who controls cyberspace. Indeed, Korean internet users reacted to the top-down strategies of the government by migrating *en masse* from the Korean web portals to global internet platforms such as Google and YouTube. Therefore, this paper will address the case study through the following research questions:

1. How did the Korean government react to the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations?
2. How did Korean web portals react to the government’s actions?
3. How did Korean internet users respond to these two institutions’ actions?

Before moving on to these questions, it is necessary to flesh out the details of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations to explain why this event become such a significant milestone in Korean internet culture.

**BACKGROUND: THE 2008 CANDLE LIGHT DEMONSTRATIONS**
Throughout the summer of 2008 huge anti-government demonstrations broke out across South Korea, and these became known as the ‘Candle Light Demonstrations,’ because demonstrators congregated around City Hall in Seoul and in other open spaces with lit candles. The demonstrations were started by the people who were against the new Korea-US Free Trade Agreement that allowed the import of US beef without health inspection by Korean customs authorities. The agreement extended to the import of US beef from cattle aged over 30 months old, which raised public concern about the possibility of
health risks and mad cow disease, especially following broadcasts from a television station, M.B.C., on the issue. The public was frustrated by both the government’s neglect of public health and its lack of political power to protect the Korean people from suspect US imports. However, the South Korean government’s reaction was to ignore the initial malcontent and to maintain the validity of their position through public announcements in the print and broadcast media.

The catalyst for much of the ensuing public outrage seems to have been an online open-community called Agora (http://agora.media.daum.net). Agora is hosted on the web portal Daum.net, which is the second biggest in the South Korean portal market (Kim Y. J. 2008: 32). Nearly all content in Korean cyberspace is in the Korean language and very little English language content is posted. Perhaps for this reason, the great majority of Korean internet users, some 85%, use Korean language web portals such as Daum.net and Naver.com as their gateway to the internet. These portals dominate the Korean internet market, and are a characteristic institution of Korean cyberspace. One of their key functions is to provide space for internet communities in which Korean internet users with common interests can upload and discuss posts on topics ranging from daily trivia to political issues. Agora is one such community.

According to KoreanClick, a Korean research centre dealing with the internet business sector, page views per day on the Agora website increased by 160.5% from 119.58 million in April 2008 to 317.29 million in May. (Lee H. N. 2008) This was the period when the issues of the US beef imports started to attract increasing public attention in South Korea. The reason for this dramatic increase in page views on Agora is thought to be the easy access it provided the public to participate in online discussion of the US beef import issue and the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations.

Agora’s role in initiating the demonstrations of 2008 is fairly well established. The online daily, Media Today, cites Agora as the original
source of all internet debate concerning the import of US beef and concerns about mad cow disease (Song H. J. *et al.* 2008: 18-19). Agora was certainly a key site in which opposition to the Free Trade Agreement were organised, and online and offline activities in South Korean appear to be closely interwoven in terms of social issues. Indeed, traffic on Agora peaked at the height of each stage of the offline demonstrations, for example, on May 2nd when the demonstrations first started, and when they escalated dramatically following the government’s neglect of public opinion and the announcement that US beef was to be imported in its official gazette on the 31st of May. On these occasions, respectively, 170,000 internet users signed a petition demanding the ‘reform of the negotiations with U.S.’ that was hosted on Agora, while 630,000 netizens later signed a similar petition demanding ‘the impeachment of President Myung-Bak Lee’ (*ibid.*).

Like other online communities, Agora facilitates postings in which information is selected and distributed by users, but it also has the advantage of providing information networking services such as RSS and Track-back systems (Song K. J. 2008: 175). This allowed discussions to be shared with other small internet communities, such as Soul Dresser, and 82Cook.com, as well as with other social organisations on the ground. Further internet-mediated dynamics saw user-created content websites, such as Afreeca.com, broadcast live footage of the demonstrations on the web, which was then hyperlinked to by small internet communities and forums, which boosted online discussion across Korean cyberspace.

With such a high degree of online activism, the demonstrations spread fast and attracted wide participation from men and women of all age groups. However, the police started to arrest demonstrators and used water cannon to disperse the demonstrators. Despite this, the Demonstrations did not die down. The government finally realised the seriousness of the situation and the President made special public announcements to apologise for his government’s decisions. When
this failed to quell the discontent, the police continued to arrest demonstrators and the government started to put legal pressure on the media to reframe their coverage of the protests.

After a hundred days the demonstrations finally ceased. In all, some 700,000 participants took part in the Seoul demonstrations, with more than an additional million taking part in other cities across the country (You 2008; Yonhapnews 2010). The demonstrations left 2,500 wounded, while a total of roughly 1,500 demonstrators were detained by police, out of which some 30 were arrested (Kim G. I. 2009) The 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations show not only the dramatic expressions of public outrage, but also the repressive nature of the Lee government. However, while the demonstrations were unsuccessful at the international level and Koreans are still eating US beef today, their main significance was that the unexpected explosion of popular discontent did eventually affect government policy and brought about some limited concessions to public opinion in renegotiations of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (Woo 2008).

Be that as it may, there remains considerable debate concerning the significance of the demonstrations in Korean academic discourse, which can be summarised as follows: Ho-Young Lee sees the Candle Light Demonstrations from the perspective of a digital phenomenon, decentralized as a consequence of the advent of the network society, through which the public’s resistance to elite-driven cultural political modes of production could be expressed (2008). Sang-Bae Kim argues that the public and demonstrators of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations should be understood differently from those resisting exploitation during South Korea’s industrialization during the 1960s and 1970s, and those who fought for democracy during the 1980s, because they were neither the subject(s) of control by political parties nor struggling in the pursuit of macroscopic justice (2008: 122). Yong-Chul Kim highlights the power of organisation through decentralized networks in the absence of any dominant group guiding
the 2008 demonstrations (2008: 127). While, for Ho-Ki Kim the main significance of the demonstrations lay in the progressive expansion of public political awareness as the demonstrations went on, as a consequence of which the public became aware of certain negative aspects of the current regime (Kim H. K. et al. 2008: 9).

**ANALYTICAL APPROACHES TO THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CANDLE LIGHT DEMONSTRATIONS**

The topic of this paper comes under the heading of theoretical debates relating to internet governance and internet user activism. I would like to raise the possibility of going beyond the debate over ‘who controls cyberspace’ by demonstrating how Korean internet users were able to evade the limitations of nationally bounded cyberspace. However, it is appropriate to start with a summary of the main issues and theoretical debates within which this paper develops its argument.

Goldsmith and Wu argue, debatably, that territorial government is still the most influential factor for internet development (2006: 180). They cite the Chinese government as an example, because it invests tens of billions of dollars with the aim of having ‘the fastest and most sophisticated information network in the world’ for ‘totalitarian control’. As a consequence, they argue that China ‘creates its own sphere of influence’ (2006: 100-101). They go on to claim that the internet is ‘a global network (that) is becoming a collection of nation-state networks’ marked by ‘Internet Borders’. This is due to three factors: the reflection of local differences in the provision and consumption of the internet; national differences in technological development (e.g. bandwidth distribution); and the enforcement of national law (2006: 149-150).

Goldsmith and Wu’s view that state control of the internet media through regulation is possible is supported to some extent by the example of the Korean government’s recent attempts to implement regulations in Korean cyberspace (KCC 2008). In a similar vein,
McChesney sees little hope of the internet fostering either a free market or democracy, because the internet is usually developed by government subsidy (1996: 108-112). Similarly, Mosco argues that the media’s promise to increase the power of its users or consumers is just a ‘myth’ and that the internet is no exception. However, while the myth of the internet’s ability to empower its users must be treated with caution, Mosco emphasises the necessity of taking into consideration the power that such myths exert in the popular imagination (2004: 22-31). Applying Mosco’s logic to the debate over the internet, it is clear that internet users’ belief in the possibility of their empowerment through cyberspace will affect the way they use it. Therefore, despite the imposition of internet regulations, people will traverse cyberspace in completely unexpected and novel ways that vary considerably from those inscribed in regulations. Consequently, trajectories of researchers need to be focused on illuminating the changing logistics (and resources) of ordinary people in the era of ICTs. This point is more fully developed in the work of Marianne Franklin (2004, 2007, 2009).

Franklin draws on the analytical framework developed by Michel de Certeau (1984, 1997) to understand cyberspace and internet culture. She argues that the activity and ‘liveliness’ of internet users needs to be considered ‘more seriously’ along with the dominant issue of power-holders in cyberspace (Franklin 2009: 226). She states that:

> Without incorporating these imminent “nonstate actors” into the scenario in what is an age of digital human “embeds”, effective responses to *Return of the State* accounts can overlook how cybernetic organisms, artificial intelligences, may well end up overriding the manual controls thereby rendering state, market, and civil society obsolete.

Franklin calls for discourses on government or global corporate intervention in cyberspace to be assessed in conjunction with discourses
on the activities of internet users. She deploys this framework to criticise the ‘strategies’ of ICTs as the power-holders’ desire to possess cyberspace, and argues (ibid.: 224) that:

The Internet and its constitutive practices and structures need to be construed not just as-a-technology but also as-an-idea, integral to the ‘scriptural economies’ that reproduce the ‘modern mythical practice’ of the Westphalian Imaginary and its representational regimes-machineries. The Internet, its so-called governance or control is integral to such meaning-making practices, and vice versa.

For this reason, Franklin seeks to examine the way internet technology is used by people who are excluded from the main discourses of ICT development. Overall, the main implication of Franklin’s detailed analysis is that discourses on both government and global corporation intervention in cyberspace must be assessed together with the discourses around the activities of internet users. This article adopts precisely this approach. Internet governance and internet users discourses, these two seemingly different stories are not two sides of the same coin but are, in fact, a Mobius strip within which the twin dynamics are mutually affective. This standpoint allows the objective evaluation of the extent to which consideration of the notion of ‘powerless’ Korean internet users’ ability to act beyond the constraints of state-controlled cyberspace takes us beyond reductionist debates about whether states (i.e. governments) actually should control cyberspace. An engagement with stories from the aftermath of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations from the perspective of a tripartite inter-relationship between the South Korean government, Korean web portals and Korean internet users allows me to develop a theoretical perspective concerned with the power of the powerless on the internet.
THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CANDLE LIGHT DEMONSTRATIONS

The following diagram maps out the chain of events in which the government, web portals and Korean internet users reacted to each other’s activities following the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations.

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REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON KOREAN CYBERSPACE SINCE THE 2008 CANDLE LIGHT DEMONSTRATION

As the chart above shows, the government attempted to introduce a number of measures designed to tighten control of cyberspace, and while most of these legislative proposals were not passed by the National Assembly, the announcement of their intended implementation sufficed to effectively muzzle protest on the Korean internet. My reading of the government’s announcements and policy documents confirms that the government justified the harshness of its reactionary reform bills as a necessary reaction to the strength of anti-government hostility voiced on the internet. Furthermore, the subsidiary governmental bodies, such as the Korean Communications Commission and the Ministry of Justice, abused their legislative power. Two examples of this abuse will be discussed in detail below, starting with policies announced by the South Korea’s telecommunications and broadcasting regulator, the Korean Communications Commission (KCC).

The KCC’s response followed rapidly after the demonstrations died down in July 2008. The Commission announced a set of ‘Internet Information Security Comprehensive Countermeasures,’ the main thrust of which can be summarized into four areas: ‘A safe and wholesome user environment;’ ‘Personal information protection and strengthening risk management;’ ‘The blocking of the Internet as a harmful environment;’ and ‘The construction of a framework for information security.’ Among these, the third area concerning the ‘blocking of the Internet as harmful environment’ was the most contentious, because the KCC planned to reform existing legislation and introduce new laws to enforce social responsibility on the part of web portals and internet users with three key measures. The first would ensure that portals could be punished if they failed to delete postings when requested by concerned parties. Secondly, the ‘real name system,’ under which users were required to log in under their real
names to make postings, was to be extended to all websites, whereas it had previously only applied to large websites with more than 100,000 visitors a day. Finally, the web portals were required to monitor all the websites and communities they hosted twenty-four hours a day (KCC 2008).

The reasons for these measures rested on the KCC’s insistence that web portals should be held responsible for all content posted on their sites. The portals, then, were required to police internet content to avoid the ‘circulation of the illegal information’ (ibid.). The KCC also argued that freedom of expression should be limited by the rights of parties injured as a result of possibly libellous postings or defamation on the internet. Therefore, as an interim measure while appropriate legislation was being prepared, web portals were put under pressure to delete any postings that could be regarded as defamatory. KCC further argued for the necessity of provisions to impose penalties for negligence of these content-policing duties as part of the planned reform of the Telecom Networks and Information Law. The Ministry of Justice took similar measures to those of the KCC, which were announced at a cabinet meeting on the same day that the KCC countermeasures were published. The Ministry of Justice planned to implement a new ‘Cyber Defamation Law’ which aimed to prevent defamation and the circulation of false information in cyberspace (Jung Y. I. 2008).

Overall, these government measures exemplify tensions between the promise of freedom of expression and the necessity of regulating cyberspace to protect public interests. However, the timing of the government’s countermeasures, which followed directly after the demonstrations died down, suggests political motivations beyond protecting public welfare. Indeed, the government’s proposed internet reforms were felt to be primarily aimed at threatening ordinary netizens and oppressing their freedom of expression (Inews 2008). As noted above, criticism of the Lee government in Korean cyberspace was a dominant theme throughout the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations,
therefore, the real intention of the government’s internet reform measures could well have been to control and limit the efficacy of Korean internet users’ political activism.

The veracity of this view is supported by my findings from interviews I conducted with South Korean government officials. One such official at an internet-related government body stated that:

The preconception of the policy maker is that if the law is established and the regulation starts to be implemented, the outcome is spontaneous. ...By the same token, I think that the Ministry of Justice (and other government bodies) announced that the stronger regulations were going to be implemented in advance, because this would work more effectively. There was no time for them to listen to public opinion, because it was an important time when they had to show positive results to a V.I.P. (Here ‘V.I.P.’ is referring to President Lee).³

The extent of government control of the media in South Korea was established in a 1999 essay by Myung-Jin Park, Chang-Nam Kim and Byung-Woo Sohn. At that time democracy was relatively new in the country and the situation might have been expected to have changed for the better since then. However, my analysis of policy documents and interviews with government agents explicitly shows that South Korean government intervention since the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations has sought to control the domestic internet sector. Clearly, in contemporary South Korean society, even in the context of the new and potentially freer communications environment promised by the internet, the agencies of power continue to overwhelm the system. In other words, no matter how the political system may have changed, those with power become agents of surveillance. Indeed, provisional findings indicate that the Lee government’s response to activism in Korean cyberspace can be compared to the reaction of the country’s authoritarian military regimes in the 1980s to public demonstrations. Although legal measures were deployed instead of direct physical
violence, as in the 1980s, the government’s aim was nonetheless to silence the voice of public dissent.

One shocking example of the implementation of the government’s tighter internet controls occurred in January 2009. An Agora user, who logged in under the ID ‘Minerva’ was arrested on the grounds that he had disseminated allegedly libellous information and had breached the Telecommunications Basic Act. Minerva had posted an article on 20 December 2008 in which he claimed that the government had posted an emergency order which banned seven major financial agencies from buying dollars in order to control the exchange rate. The prosecution considered this to be libellous information, and claimed that the two billion dollars had been lost a result of Minerva’s posting. Beyond discussion about how a single posting by an ordinary internet user could influence the decisions of eminent bankers and damage the economy, the real issue of debate was how the prosecution could have arrested Minerva so easily. Daum.net, the web portal that hosted the site on which the article was posted, handed over Minerva’s personal information to the prosecution (Son 2009). However there was much debate about whether due legal procedure had been followed or whether Daum had been pressured into leaking the information. This is a clear indication of the extent to which web portals had lost the ability to resist government control of their activities (Jung J. O. 2009).

Overall, my research finds that the Lee government employed two main strategies to control Korean cyberspace: they attempted to silence the voices of individual internet users and they tried to force the internet portals to police user-generated content and activities on their behalf. The first strategy was achieved through the arrest the internet users who posted articles critical of the regime, which was designed to instill a sense of fear into average netizens. The second strategy – taming the internet portals – was accomplished through the announcement (rather than successful legislation) of the Cyber Defamation Law, and the KCC’s measures requiring the compulsory monitoring of
community notice boards by web portals. Despite the lack of legally enforceable measures, the web portals chose to maintain their position in Korean cyberspace by complying with the government’s requests. In doing so they revealed not only their hypocrisy as institutions which had once claimed to champion free speech, but more significantly, demonstrated the power of hierarchical relationships in South Korean society that underlie and go beyond those legitimate relations enshrined in the constitution.

HEARING ORDINARY PEOPLE IN KOREAN CYBERSPACE

Cyber Asylum Seekers
Following the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations, while the government’s actions ushered in a newly regulated Korean cyberspace, they also resulted in both a considerable loss of popularity for the government and a loss of faith in the Korean web portals. The government’s actions were not without reaction from internet users. Indeed, the ‘Cyber Asylum Seekers Project’ can be seen in this context. The Cyber Asylum Seeker’s Project refers to a popular movement on the Korean internet in which users established online communities, or ‘cafés’, on Korean web portals that encouraged the movement of new communities to websites hosted on U.S. registered domains, in order to be free from Korean government surveillance. My analysis of this reaction, below, is based on interviews conducted both face-to-face and online with internet users involved in this movement.

One such site was ExileKorea, which was created during the Candle Light Demonstrations to archive postings from Agora after the host, Daum.net, began to censor postings under pressure from the Lee government. One administrator of this site, whose ID is Jonathan, was interviewed and stated that the motivation of opening ExileKorea was to avoid the government’s repression of Korean cyberspace, particularly
that of open access online forums. He added that he wanted to archive the postings that were being deleted to preserve the flow of the online discourse for users. His concern about the deletion of postings is also borne out by other users who posted to ExileKorea complaining that their posts on Agora had been deleted without permission. Several other postings on ExileKorea feature users’ complaints of injustice when their posts on Agora left them susceptible to the accusation that they had breached the defamation law.

However, it was not only Agora users who were oppressed by the government. Users who joined other online communities or ‘cafés’ related to Agora were also targeted, as the following excerpt from an interview shows:

User ID ‘Live with modesty’ set up the ‘Agora Justice Forum.’ However, the police visited his workplace. He was very worried about his family and the risk to his social position, so he gave up his role in the café. The current administrator, WooGongLeeSan, (then) took over the position of administrator.4

This interviewee, who is a member of the Agora Justice Forum, went on to express her own anxieties, “I did not feel any real pressure until Minerva was arrested. His arrest clearly showed that personal freedom of expression was being repressed.” This illustrates the impact that fear of reprisals had on Korean internet users, especially following the well-publicised arrest of famous internet users. Many users ended up leaving their favourite online ‘places,’ with the result that their voices on the internet were silenced and contained. This is the context in which the Cyber Asylum Seeker’s Project needs to be understood.

Ultimately, however, the government’s oppression of internet based criticism was successful. The political activism of Korean internet users could no longer be maintained either on the internet or offline when the users’ economic interests and social positions came under threat. My findings from other interviews indicate that personal safety and
economic interests came to overwhelm political interests. Another member of the Agora Justice Forum explained how this prevented him from more active participation:

I could not officially take part in the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations, but attended them unofficially in my personal capacity. I was worried about the company where I worked (a well-known newspaper). If my presence in the demonstrations were revealed, my company’s image as press company would be damaged. Apart from ‘Minerva’ and ‘Boredom Window’ who were arrested early, I have seen some others being arrested by the police. I have intentionally avoided doing anything that could have a (negative) effect on the company that I used work for… So, there was a disparity between my obligation as an employee and my private life.\(^5\)

For this and other reasons, attempts by the Cyber Asylum Projects to establish thriving new platforms hosted on overseas servers did not succeed. As time went by, the court found Agora user Minerva not guilty and a number of Cyber Asylum Seeker Project-related websites lost their momentum and went into decline. My analysis of postings and interviews related to this suggests that attempts to make a new web portal failed due to the changing characteristics of user activities, which became overly political and hierarchical and consequently moved further away from everyday life concerns. However, despite the closure or decline of communities following the failure of the Cyber Asylum Seekers Project, the Project itself did produce some positive effects. It alerted Korean internet users to the possibilities of using other, non-Korean cyberspaces, and increased their awareness of the scope of government surveillance in Korean cyberspace, and of the web portals’ complicity. Moreover, the testimony of the ‘underground cyber asylum seekers’ tell a different, more positive story.
GLOBAL INTERNET SERVICES & THE KOREAN WEB PORTALS

While the Lee government’s ‘reign of terror’ worked to silence Korean internet users, its attempts to control the internet were not completely successful, and faced four significant setbacks. The first of these came from global corporations, such as Google and YouTube, which refused to follow the restrictions imposed on the Korean internet. The South Korean government lacked the power to control them, because Korean legislation did not apply to them, and their internet reform bills are only compulsory for South Korean websites and their users. As a result, a significant proportion of Korean internet users migrated their email accounts and other daily cyberspace activities away from Korean portals and started to use global portals and other services. Therefore, as a result of the aftermath of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations the Korean web portal industry’s previously exclusive control of the market was weakened as their market share fragmented. According to KoreanClick, unique visitors of Daum.net and Naver.com dropped from 22,920,000 to 22,190,000 from 26,590,000 to 25,630,000 respectively. In contrast, UV (Unique Visitor) and PV (Page View) of Google in the Korean domestic market had significantly increased from 5,360,000 to 6,410,000 and from 190,800,000 to 280,000,000 respectively, which represented approximately up to a 60% increase in one year (Kim H. S. 2008).

This movement of Korean internet users away from Korean web portals to global web services prompted stakeholders in the Korean internet industry to define themselves as victims of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstrations. An official in the internet industry states that:

We are also a victim of Cyber Asylum Seeking. Last year, Gmail was no.1 (in the Korean market) in terms of time duration. What this signifies is that people, who use email, actively moved (away) from our company to Gmail. After the email account of the writer of the TV programme P.D. Note was scrutinized by the government, our email
service usage rate dropped significantly. It is worrying… If people leave, because the quality of our service is bad, then we should be able to attract them back again by upgrading our service. If not, something is wrong.⁶

As Korean internet users changed their behaviour, the power-holders at the Korean web portals took note and changed their attitudes toward the ordinary people. This prompted the second blow to the Lee government’s attempts to control Korean cyberspace. In a significant move, the web portal industry launched the Korean Internet Self-Governance Organization (KISO) in 2009 in an attempt to redefine the relationship between the government and Korean internet enterprises (Jung H. S. 2009). KISO published its own guidelines for the regulation of web portal activities, thus signalling the industry’s ability to self-regulate. The self-governance organization soon came to blows with the Korean Communications Standard Commissions (KCSC) over postings related to the sinking of a South Korean navy ship on 26 March 2010. The KISO rejected the KCSC’s request to delete postings uploaded by Korean internet users relating to the incident. Nothing like that had ever happened before. An official in the web portal industry stated that:

The government wants to deal with this matter through the law, because the jurisdiction is flexible depending on the government’s interpretation. KISO acts to protect users. If the Korean web portal did not have power, the postings would be deleted. We had a reason to resist the government.⁷

As the South Korean government faced opposition from both global and domestic web portals, a third blow to its attempts to control cyberspace came when the net activist Minerva was freed after four months imprisonment on 20 April 2009. This verdict was widely interpreted as indirect criticism of the Lee government’s attempts to regulate and censor the Korean internet. This was not the only
legal setback the government was to face. Despite announcing its intention to pass its ‘Internet Information Security Comprehensive Countermeasures’ into law back in mid-2008, it has not been successful to date. Most of the relevant legislation is still pending and has been held up in the National Assembly. Indeed, no progress has been made on the compulsory monitoring of websites or the Cyber Defamation Law, and only the Real Name System extension and a revision of the Press Mediation Law to cover online news services have been formally implemented to date.

Overall, despite these setbacks, the Lee government’s internet measures, although they may still lack legislative power, were successful in threatening Korean internet users and Korean web portal enterprises for almost two years from July 2008 until May 2010. Most significantly, however, the government and the web portals’ logics of operation over this period were not approved of by the majority of Korean society and the Cyber Asylum resulted from the devaluation of these institutions.

The South Korean public has come to regard these institutions with considerable distrust, and this may signal serious problems for them in the future. As illustrated above, Korean internet users utilised the global websites as deliberate tactical resistance to the hypocrisy of the power-holders in Korean society. These global websites became the new medium by which Korean internet users began to create the new landscape of Korean internet culture.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the aftermath of the 2008 Candle Light Demonstration from the perspective of a power struggle between the Lee government, the Korean web portals, and Korean netizens. The significance of this case is that both the government and web portal sectors changed their systems in response to the changing ways in which ordinary Korean internet users came to view them. Furthermore, despite
the announcement of new internet regulations, the South Korean government was not able to control Korean cyberspace, largely due to the ability of global portals to refuse or circumvent South Korean domestic internet regulations. This effectively empowered Korean internet users to migrate their email accounts and other internet activities away from Korean-based web portals and utilise global internet resources. The consequent fall in Korean web portal profits led the domestic industry to take collaborative action to self-regulate in an attempt to protect themselves, and to secure the interests and privacy of their users. Therefore, this case study clearly demonstrates the power of ordinary Korean internet users to affect changes in other internet stakeholders through their traversal of global cyberspace beyond the domination that existed at the national level. The availability of resources beyond the scope of the Korean-language internet provided concrete choices to Korean internet users, which they exploited as a tactic to subvert the power of the government and the Korean web portals.

While the dynamics of this case derive from the particular characteristics of South Korean internet culture, there must be other stories in other places around the world that can illuminate internet users’ ability to act beyond the constraints of ‘national cyberspace,’ and that can take us beyond the debate about who controls cyberspace. Therefore, further research is needed to bring to light hidden stories, such as the case narrated above, in order to explicate the power of the powerless.

NOTES
1. The data for this paper has been collected in three ways. Information about the Lee government’s response to the Candle Light Demonstrations was collected through policy analysis documents published on various government websites between 01 July 2008 and 31 December 2009. Face-to-face and online interviews were
also conducted with participants in each of the major groups covered in the study, including employees at government bodies and at Korean web portals, members of online communities, and ordinary Korean internet users. Finally, online participation-observation was conducted on two online communities relating to the Korean Asylum Seekers Project.

2. My analysis of the South Korean government’s response to the Candle Light Demonstrations is based on a review of various policy documents published since July 2008 on a number of governmental web sites.

3. Based on the interview with an official at an internet-related government body, a Café near her office, on 22 July 2010. N.B. All the interview materials are translated by myself.


5. Based on the interview with member of online café ‘Agora Justice Forum’, a café, on 08 September 2010.

6. Based on the interview with an official in the internet industry, at her office, on 03 September 2010.

7. Based on the interview with an official in the internet industry on 06 September 2010.

REFERENCES


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INTERVIEWS

8 September 2010: Interview with member of online café ‘Agora Justice Forum’, at a café in Seoul.

3 September 2010: Interview with an official in the internet industry, at an office in Seoul.

22 July 2010: Interview with an official at an internet-related government body, at a café in Seoul.

Dong-Hyun Song is currently an MPhil/PhD candidate in Media & Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is investigating changes in the landscape of Korean cyberspace and South Korean internet culture that followed in the aftermath of the South Korean Candle Light Demonstrations of 2008. Dong-Hyun came to the UK in 2001 after completing his mandatory two-and-a-half-year term of national service in Korea. Since then he has obtained BA and MA degrees in Film & Television at Westminster University.

Email: cop01ds@gold.ac.uk