

Government Cyberspace to Enhance Democracy

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ABSTRACT

For the purpose of creating more democratic society, many countries implemented cyber-government projects which produced web pages where ordinary citizens could participate. This government cyberspace is used to give citizens a place in cyberspace to express their concerns. However in countries where the Confucius tradition yields heavy influence, people are not accustomed to blunt complaint against the government officials, not to mention anybody senior in terms of age or rank. The Confucius tradition still dictates behavior of many people in East Asian countries such as South Korea. Even in e-mail communication, people try their best to show the sign of "respect." In government cyberspace such as the city of Seoul's web pages, people behave differently. Even though citizens have to use their real names, it is found that those who write messages in the bulletin board of the city of Seoul government's web pages tend not to use terms that are often accompanied in e-mails for the purpose of expressing "respect." Therefore it can be inferred that government cyberspace can contribute to enhance democracy in countries where democratic tradition is shallow.

INTRODUCTION

Practicing democracy has been difficult for developing and under-developed countries. Most of these countries suffered from brutal dictatorship and went through long and often bloody struggle to obtain democratic rule. Modern history tells us that the mankind strived to achieve democracy and succeeded in many parts of the world. A few countries were able to finish this arduous journey to democracy thanks to economic development. Economic development is said to be the key factor in determining political system of a nation (Yandle, 1990). Economic prosperity gives people freedom and power to challenge the status quo of the current political regime which is usually 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 or so we saw the information technology revolution which transformed people's lives completely for mostly better consequences. 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 tradition of maintaining democratic government. 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 alienation of people from democratic political process (Gerber & Morton, 1998). In order to alleviate the political alienation, many governments including local ones implemented cyber-government which usually refers to web pages of a government that are used for allowing citizen to voice their feedback on public policy and participate in political processes (Gronlund, 2001). 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 the affluent countries already have a high level 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.

I would like to posit that a nation with shallow democratic tradition 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 unlike traditionally democratic ones. South Korea belongs to this new group of countries where economic development and inevitable democratization were achieved in the last three decades. Nowadays 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 (National Computerization Agency, 2003). With the highly-developed IT infrastructure the government wanted to usher more 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 are too broad-focused to show any evidence of the benefit of cyber-democracy, I 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 gloomy days of military dictatorship in the past the city government of Seoul was run by the 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 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 (City of Seoul, 2003). I have investigated a bulletin board which was 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 matters such as garbage collection, taxi service, traffic control, etc. I have 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. I also conducted cyberspace survey with people who had experience of lodging complaints in the web page of government for the purpose of testing the hypothesis that in cyberspace, people overcome the Confucius-influenced habit of expressing signs of “respect” while

they write their concerns to the government officials in any form of correspondence including e-mail.

As Lee (2000) has indicated, Koreans are heavily influenced by the Confucian culture which emphasized respect to elders and seniors in the social hierarchy. In Lee's paper they are shown to be concerned about being not respectful enough when they use e-mail to convey their messages to their seniors especially in workplaces since e-mail can not convey many social cues of "respect" which otherwise can be carried in other forms of communication such as talking on the phone, talking in-person, etc.. This behavior must be an obstacle to practice democratic political process which requires healthy criticism on authority figures. However after examining the contents of complaints, I found that people were not very concerned about 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 cultural habit and focus on transmitting their message.

WEB BULLETIN BOARD ANALYSIS

I investigated a bulletin board in the form of the web page which contained complaints to the mayoral office. 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 disrespectful, but only interested in writing their problems as clearly as possible. This attitude was a complete reversal of the behavior found in Lee's paper (2000). I looked into 103 postings from different individuals. Then I classified those postings into two groups according to the following criterion:

One group of postings whose content 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..

Another group of postings whose content has none of these "respectful" phrases.

Surprisingly majority of postings did not contain any decorative heading to express "respect" that is the norm in the Confucius tradition (Table 1).

Postings with no "respect" phrases	Postings with "respect" phrases
87	16

Table 1: Grouping of Postings

I theorized that people would find the web page bulletin board more "liberating" compared to sending an individual e-mail to the government official where the burden of "showing respect" haunts them. Thus I propose a following hypothesis:

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

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

<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[1] b) agree[2] c) disagree[3] d) strongly disagree[4]

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 only known characteristics of subjects was the fact that respondents were people who posted a message to a government web page bulletin board with their real name(most Korean government web pages require the usage of real names to prevent unwelcome pranks). However for the purpose of determining what caused the break-up of the Confucius-influenced habit, demographic information is not deemed to be necessary.

SURVEY RESULTS

125 people responded to the cyberspace survey. Table 2 shows the result of the survey.

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

Table 2: Message Poster Survey Result

I 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, I have empirical evidence that citizens of South Korea can be “liberated” from the burdens of the Confucius practice of “showing 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 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 bold and the survey result confirms it.

CONCLUSION

How can people be ignorant of the tenacious barrier of “showing 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. Good reason for people’s behavior can be that people look at others’ postings which influence their own behavior. This psychological behavior is called self-efficacy (Cervone, 2000). Self-efficacy theory tells that people compare what others have done with their own behavior and can be influenced positively in terms of enforcing 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. Thus we can conclude that the use of cyberspace such as a bulletin board web page must foster growth of democracy by cutting off the cultural influence which makes people behave not appropriately for democracy. The empirical study of city of Seoul exhibits the evidence that use of cyberspace, in fact, can enhance democratic political process, which was not obvious in traditionally democratic nations.

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