Ethos in Chaos? Reaction to Video Files Depicting Socially Harmful Images in the Channel 2 Japanese Internet Forum

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Channel 2 (ni-channeru) is the single most widely known free access Japanese Internet bulletin board forum, with over five million people accessing it each month. With its many dysfunctional aspects, Channel 2 is a synonym for the chaos of the Internet in Japan. This study analyzes the dynamics among users of the Channel 2 forum, focusing specifically on the dissemination of alarming images and video files of the October 2004 Japanese hostage murder in Iraq. An examination was conducted of November 2004 Channel 2 threads and entries about the dissemination of images and video files of the hostage murder. Our analysis reveals how content that highly violated moral principles appeared and how a self-regulating mechanism by the user community functioned pro-socially in an uncontrolled, anonymous Internet forum. These findings contrast with previous studies that predicted asocial or antisocial behavior in anonymous online environments.

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Introduction

Channel 2 (ni-channeru) is the world’s largest single Internet bulletin board forum and the most widely known single free access Japanese Internet forum, with over five million people accessing it each month (http://www.2ch.net). Discussion board topics range from international news, business, shopping, health concerns, and education to more controversial topics such as inside information leaks from dissatisfied employees of companies and from journalists seeking to provide sensitive information not publishable in the mainstream media.
Channel 2 is famous for its numerous ignominious entries and incidents (Onishi, 2004). Indeed, with all its dysfunctional aspects, Channel 2 a well-known synonym for “Internet pandemonium” in Japan. Risqué or taboo subjects that are usually not discussed in normal face-to-face communication in Japan are popular topics in Channel 2. Another characteristic of the Channel 2 forum is the frequency of direct confrontation among users, in a culture where verbal conflict is considered antisocial and is characteristically avoided in face-to-face communication. Channel 2 has also been a center for venting hatred and discrimination towards others, and it has been associated with illegal and criminal activities. The free access and anonymity of the users shelters the identities of those who post entries; as a consequence, the content of Channel 2 often appears to reflect some of the worst examples of human communication behavior.

This study describes Channel 2 and analyzes the dynamics involved in the dissemination of socially harmful content on the forum, specifically focusing on video file sharing and downloading among Channel 2 users. We chose to investigate the dissemination of the execution images and video files of the October 2004 Japanese hostage murder in Iraq because of the community ethos that arose, along with the shock and horror generated by the images, among the users of the forum.

Background

Internet Usage in Japan and Efforts to Deal with “Harmful Content”

According to the 2006 Dentsu Communication Institute White Paper on Information Media, Internet usage in Japan at the end of 2004 reached 79.48 million users, approximately 62.3% of the population. Given that the number of users was 16.94 million in 1998, the population increased by five times within a span of eight years.

As Internet access becomes more common in Japan, the content of popular websites is increasingly becoming a major concern. The Internet has an abundance of almost any type of content; however, some of this content is inappropriate for viewing by minors. A massive effort in Japan is being directed toward how to protect minors, especially young children, from harmful content. The content in question here is mostly in violation of the Internet Content Rating Association’s safety standards, and some of it may be unworthy of adult viewers, as well.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) sponsors annual conferences addressing the issue of how people access “harmful content in the information society” through the Internet. Regional governments have also begun taking action. Since October 2005, the Tokyo Ordinance on Fostering Juvenile Health Article 18.7 states that: 1) Internet service providers (ISP) must provide or develop filtering software to eradicate information that has the potential to harm the “sound and wholesome fostering” of youth; 2) Internet service providers must confirm whether or not any minors are residing with those who wish to begin service and must inform, promote, and make available the filtering software; and 3) facilities that provide Internet service must try their best to have youth use devices that have installed the filtering software.
The Japanese National Police Agency (NPA) is the major sponsor of a commissioned organization to handle a telephone hotline service that provides counsel about information on the Internet that is deemed to be illegal or harmful. An information center of the same organization is also managing information about illegal and harmful sites, and if a site is determined to be so, the center will report it to the NPA, or will request that the provider delete harmful sites. The Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Soumusho) has a research group examining the current extent of illegal and harmful information on the Internet and has reported a summary of their findings. Discussions are being held on problems accompanying Internet anonymity, the criminal liability of ISPs, and how to create standards for determining whether or not information is harmful.

Another approach to countering harmful content in Japan is to advocate media literacy and media education in the formal education system. However, the mainstream assumption about media literacy in Japan is that it is only for very young children. This is based on the false assumption that all adults have media literacy and that all children do not, which is contrary to the results and claims of many previous studies (Buckingham, 1993, 1996; Gauntlett, 1997). Too much emphasis has been placed on details about very young children lacking mental and physical maturity in comparison to adults in Japan, resulting in media literacy and media education that focuses only on inoculating very young children from harm.

Furthermore, the current media education policy prevalent in Japan concerning such images is a “don’t watch, don’t show” policy that mainly promotes web browser filters and Internet filtering software. Unfortunately, this approach is unrealistic because current filters cannot address all of the harmful content currently found on the Internet. Filters based on these standards are most effective for monitoring web browsing activity or totally blocking out IP addresses, although even with these filters, web browsing is still not 100% shielded and safe for children.

According to an Internet White Paper survey of 1,600 people in Japan (Internet Kyoukai, 2005), the most likely source of exposure to harmful content—excluding computer virus contagion (57.6%)—is obscene or indecent content (56.6%), followed by slanderous postings, character assassinations or false rumors (28.1%), pyramid schemes (26.8%), illegal material (15.5%), fraud (15.4%), and unauthorized exposure of private information (13.1%). A noteworthy point from this survey result is how the people surveyed were conscious that exposure to obscene or indecent content was harmful, but they did not consider extremely violent content in the same way. The second highest likely source of harmful content—slanderous postings, character assassinations, or false rumors—is most commonly available to Internet users through the most popular Japanese Internet forum, Channel 2.

Electronic Forums in Japan
The technological development of Japanese newsgroups and electronic bulletin board forums has been similar to electronic bulletin boards in the United States
and Europe. However, some aspects of Japanese Web-based Internet forums have evolved differently due to linguistic/cultural differences and a subsequent concentration of domestic users on Japanese electronic bulletin boards. Similar cultural contrasts have also been reported between China and the U.S. and Europe (Mooney, 2004; Yang, 2003).

Prior to the proliferation of Internet access and users in Japan, commercial and grassroots bulletin board systems were the most common form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the 1980s. The commercial computer communication systems run by NIFTY and Asahi-Net had bulletin board communities called “forums,” in which norms of usage and moderation all depended on designated or volunteer forum system operators. The forum participants of these commercial and grassroots bulletin board systems did not necessarily use their real names. In contrast, the information exchange conducted in discussion newsgroups (called net news in Japanese) such as “fj” were usually conducted using real names. These newsgroups were used by early Internet adopters in Japan, who were mostly students, researchers, and IT technicians.

Free bulletin board rental services began in the mid-1990s, making it possible to view and make postings (contributions) in the same manner as viewing websites through browsers. Various bulletin board scripts became public, and maintaining a BBS on one’s own server became possible also. People who viewed websites were now able to leave their opinions and impressions about a website through bulletin board systems. During this period, usage of the free bulletin board system “T-Cup” was relatively popular in Japan.

At the same time, another trend in Japan was emerging—to create bulletin board communities in which many users would congregate online. One of the first large-scale communities was called Ayashii-world (meaning “strange world”). The content in this forum was mainly “underground” and “subculture” related, and the contributors usually did not indicate their names in the name field, so that the community became an anonymous forum. Ayashii-world closed in 1998 and was replaced by another community named Amezou that was originally a collection of links to bulletin board communities. Amezou eventually created its own bulletin board and began attracting users.

Prior to Amezou, bulletin board forums would display new postings above older ones, or else they used “tree type” displays. Both are difficult to read through. Amezou altered this so that new threads (discussion topics pages) would display above older threads, and newer postings to existing threads would follow the older postings in sequence. This style was adopted by Channel 2, which began operation in 1999, after Amezou closed down. Channel 2 inherited many of the Amezou users upon commencement of its services.

Channel 2 is moderated by the general public, or more specifically by a volunteer group in which some individuals are self-elected and others are picked from other users. Each thread is limited to 1,000 postings, and another thread must be created if the discussion continues. Usually, the original thread name will continue to be used,
with a “Part 2” added, meaning that 1,000 postings have already been made and that the thread is a continuation of a prior thread.

In the Channel 2 system, a posting in a thread will either bump up the thread’s numerical position in the thread list or not change the position in the thread list, depending on what is typed in the email field of the posting. Posts with an email field with 1) an actual email address or 2) the word “age,” or 3) that are left empty by the post author will bump up or raise the thread to a higher position in the list, whereas an email field in which the post author has entered the word “sage” will have no effect on changing the position of the thread in the list. Threads higher up in a thread list tend to be viewed more frequently than those lower down the list, and as a result, attract more trolls, spam, and posts that are devoid of meaning. Users in active threads who wish to continue their discussions without unnecessary attention or nuisance deliberately use “sage” for their postings, and this has become the mainstream custom for many active threads. Inactive threads or threads with only “sage” postings get pushed down the thread list by newer threads or other threads that have been bumped up and are eventually pushed out of the thread list, unless an “age” post bumps the thread up the list. The older threads are sent to a paid archive and after some time, get deleted.9

Channel 2 preserved the anonymous posting system, in contrast to the system of most U.S. Internet forums that requires registration and email verification. Although a name field is available in Channel 2 threads, it is hardly ever used. This allows people to post and deliver information without taking any risks by revealing their identity. It thus creates an atmosphere in which people are able to discuss anything in absolute honesty, mainly due to the fact that nobody knows who is involved in the discussion. Many advocates of the Channel 2 Internet forum cite this aspect to justify the important social role and function the forum serves.

Unfortunately, the same aspect has caused Channel 2 to be considered the epitome of chaos in the Japanese Internet environment. For example, the frequency of confrontation is great in the Channel 2 forum, which is noteworthy in that the Japanese culture usually avoids face-to-face confrontation (Onishi, 2004). Moreover, Channel 2 has had postings about future crimes, ranging from actual murder advertisements to leaking information about Japanese college entrance examinations, as a result of which police periodically monitor and react immediately to any threats on the Channel 2 forum. Because of these characteristics, Channel 2 is considered antisocial in the Japanese cultural context and usually receives negative coverage in the news.

Is the Channel 2 Internet Forum a “Virtual” Public Sphere?
Habermas (1974) conceptualized the public sphere as a realm where public opinion can be formed and where citizens can act as a public body with the freedom to assemble and make their opinions known. This conceptualization was made in an era when newspapers, magazines, radio, and television were the media of the public sphere. Habermas discussed the liberal model of the public sphere and how an industrial mass democracy in a social welfare state could not successfully adopt it.
Garnham (1992) discussed the structure and function of the mass media and its properties that can be considered to constitute a public sphere. Keane (1995) discussed the realms of the micro-public spheres, meso-public spheres, and macro-public spheres in relation to communication contexts and organizations. Garnham (1992) and Keane (1995) both hinted at the weak possibilities of the media creating a public sphere, and such a realm seemed quite distant until the advent of developments brought by the new media technologies and the Internet. Since then, many attempts have been made to apply Habermas’ (1974) concept of the public sphere—as a “space” for citizens to express themselves through speech or action and participate through discourse by challenging or introducing ideas freely—to CMC (Mided, 2000; Sassi, 2000). The idea behind a virtual public sphere or public sphere in cyberspace is that through the Internet, citizens will be enabled to reach consensus through open debate.

The notion that a public sphere ever existed has been challenged by Schudson (1997), along with others pointing out that gender and/or socioeconomic inequalities make equal participation difficult to realize (Fraser, 1992; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Ryan, 1992). Buchstein (1997) has argued that the Internet may provide the best environment for the realization of Habermas’s notion of a public sphere. However, Poster (1997) disagrees that a “virtual” public sphere has emerged, pointing to the lack of accountability and trust caused by anonymity and the abundance of lack of agreement among online communicators. The fragmented nature of the Internet (Papacharissi, 2002) and lack of sensible discussion due to Internet “individualism” (Dahlberg, 2001) are some of the other reasons that have been put forth for why a “virtual” public sphere would never be formed. While this may hold true for many of the bulletin board forums outside Japan, we nevertheless predict that some aspects of the Channel 2 Internet forum may be leading toward the formation of a “virtual” public sphere.

Channel 2 has evolved into the foremost Japanese website for Japanese Internet users to discuss (or just view opinions on) various topics. The speed at which new information is introduced and updated, along with the range of information found in Channel 2, has further elevated the importance of this forum. Even big companies closely follow how their products or corporate image are being discussed in the Channel 2 forum.

Moreover, the forum allows all voices and opinions to have access with minimum or no control by the administrator. Anonymity of users—especially thread starters—has resulted in Channel 2 often being flooded with pointless threads or trolls. However, the lack of risk due to its anonymity allows important information to flow into the forum as well; the anonymity creates a place for important communication to take place. The guarantee of anonymity in a virtual environment allows users accessing and participating in the forum to post entries that are truthful, and which may be difficult to state in the physical world due to individuals’ social status, position, or (lack of) comfort with public communication. For example, not all people are adept in direct interpersonal communication due to anxiety or self-efficacy issues, but they may be more relaxed or less intimidated in stating their
ideas in a virtual environment. This characteristic of anonymity in Channel 2 has created a label for people who are dynamic on Channel 2 but more reserved in real life—*Net-benkei*. *Net-benkei* comes from the Japanese word *uchi-benkei*, which refers to a person (usually male) who is a “lion” at home but a “mouse” outside. Therefore, net-benkei refers to a man who is a lion online but a mouse in everyday life.

Behavior on Channel 2 is at times “unsightly” and includes displays of racism and outright hatred toward society. Many Japanese would probably feel ashamed if this forum were taken to represent the majority opinions of Japanese citizens. However unflattering this reflection might be, however, the forum may, in fact, mirror Japanese public opinion, at least among the people who are online. Due to its anonymity, Channel 2 may be cultivating a Habermasian virtual public sphere.

**Anonymity and Social Behavior in the Japanese Internet Environment**

Previous studies of CMC in relation to social behavior have focused on the topics, interactions, and attitudes of participants in CMC. Most relevant to this study is the debate regarding whether CMC is asocial or antisocial (Kraut et al., 1998; Stoll, 1995). At the center of this debate are technological (asocial) characteristics of CMC that are believed to lower the quality of communication and/or have a negative impact on everyday life (antisocial).

Asocial behavior can be understood as deviance in the form of refusal to communicate, although neurotic symptoms indicate the most severe cases. In interpersonal relationships, being asocial is the state in which one is not able to respond to normal social demands and tries to escape them. This may be a result of one of the following or a combination of: lack of social ability and skills, anxiety or tension resulting from interpersonal situations, lack of self-esteem, negative self-evaluation, and preference for isolation (Watanabe, 2000).

Antisocial behavior is understood as deviance from social norms and is often labeled as any behavior that is problematic for society. Narrowly defined, it refers to criminal and sexual deviance, but in communication studies, antisocial behavior is used in a wider sense. Antisocial behavior is often thought of as a result of one of the following or a combination of: confusion due to diversification or changes in social norms, lack of restraints, and/or stress (Watanabe, 2000).

The asocial and antisocial aspects of CMC are often assumed to be triggered by a lack of social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and lack of cues (Joinson, 2003; Rutter, 1987). These lacks characteristic of text-based CMC are thought to make CMC impersonal in nature and induce a lack of personal relationships. However, a criticism of these so called “lacks” was made by Walther’s (1996) concept of hyperpersonal communication, which states that CMC “surpasses normal interpersonal levels” and can actually become more personal and friendlier than face-to-face communication. Online participants, such as those in online support groups, can become more similar in thought and friendlier due to being members in the same group. Furthermore, CMC users often utilize different verbal and social cues such as emoticons (Wallace, 1999) and can create a more personal communication
environment through these devices. As Katz and Rice (2002) have pointed out, people are trying to create and sustain relationships by building networks through CMC, which in essence functions like just another mode of communication.

The anonymity of Channel 2 has allowed for it to become in some respects a lawless area for Japanese Internet users. Thus legal and illegal file sharing and downloading flourish on Channel 2 as well. Although P2P software and its usage are well known in Japan (because of the existence of Japanese P2P platform software such as Winny), a preference for using the web browser interface exists among Channel 2 users as well as many Japanese Internet users, so the more popular method of file-sharing in these forums is using an “uploader”—a rental file server for uploading and downloading music, pictures, movies, and software—and posting a link to the server. For example, currently in 2007, Rapidshare (rapidshare.de) is a popular server for such files. As the legal status of an “uploader” is usually questionable, uploader information is often disguised but understood among the users in the Channel 2 community.

One large incentive for users in the Channel 2 community to share files is to view illegal or morally questionable violent content. In the Japanese media environment, broadcast and print media are allowed to show fictitious deaths acted by actors or animated. Images of fictitious death abound in the Japanese traditional media such as television and are prominent in manga comic books. However, real images of death are usually censored in traditional media broadcasts in Japan out of consideration for religious and privacy concerns. This is not the case for all nations, however, such that in some broadcasts in other nations, images of actual death such as corpses from accidents or war are aired, and subsequently these images may be put on the Internet. At other times, such as during the recent war in Iraq, hostage executions were released onto the Internet and were then aggregated onto various file servers. These images are relatively easy to access, and detailed methods for how to bypass filtering software to access these images over the Internet can easily be found by minors through scanning Channel 2.11

In order to further examine the dynamics of Channel 2, this study focuses on the dynamics of video file sharing and downloading among users of Channel 2, specifically the threads during the time of dissemination of the alarming images and video files of the October 2004 Japanese hostage murder in Iraq. A qualitative analysis of November 2004 Channel 2 threads and a content analysis of the entries about dissemination of images and video files of the actual hostage murder were conducted, with a focus on the following research question:

**RQ:** How did Channel 2 users react toward video files of the October-November 2004 Japanese hostage murder in Iraq?

Through this research question, this study examines how Channel 2 users first discussed this topic and how postings about this topic were moderated. The study also aims at investigating the social dynamics of Channel 2 user discussions to
determine the potential of Channel 2 to form a “virtual” public sphere. We also examine the mainstream news flow in Japan of the same event.

**Methodology**

To address the research question, we first searched two different Japanese national newspapers available online, the *Mainichi Newspaper* and the *Asahi Newspaper*, from October 25, 2004 to November 10, 2004, in order to determine the newspaper timeline of events leading up to and following the execution of Shosei Koda.

We then conducted a preliminary content analysis of two short randomly selected news-related threads (that had under 300 postings) of the Channel 2 forum in November 2004 in order to determine the type of language in each posting that was used in the Channel 2 forum and the meanings of each posting. The results of this analysis defined the following categories for our subsequent coding and content analysis of the threads: 1) criticism towards a person or an organization, 2) anticipation of an event or attacks aimed at those anticipating an event, 3) information provision, 4) circulation of false information, 5) banter, 6) anger, 7) questions, 8) general comments, and 9) URL postings that are traps or schemes. Our analysis also found that many postings were blank or had no relevant content, including art or graffiti made out of letters, often referred to as *ascii art* (Danet, 2001).

We selected five sequential threads from the anti-war and execution video thread (*Kubikiridougawomite Sensouhantaisurusure*). This thread series was initiated in the Channel 2 forum as a collection of links to the execution video and pictures related to Iraq, along with discussion and exchange of opinions about the horror of war. The thread continues even now as a forum to discuss and exchange information on execution videos. For our analysis, we selected the Channel 2 threads from October 27, 2004 to November 2, 2004 (five threads each containing 1,000 postings, Parts 11–15 of the anti-war and execution video thread series *Kubikiridougawomite Sensouhantaisurusure*) that were related to the war in Iraq and the hostage Shosei Koda. Although we initially conducted the content analysis using nine categories, in Part 11 we found many comments that were prayers for Shosei Koda’s safety, and in Parts 14 and 15 we found many postings that were verifications (e.g., of the execution and the video) or comments on terrorism, politics, or war. We also separated “anticipation of an event” and “attacks aimed at those anticipating an event” into two categories, and URL schemes was also separated into two categories. This resulted in the 16 categories listed in Table 1, which we used for coding the five threads from the anti-war and execution video thread series. Each category is numbered in the order in which it first appeared in the thread series.

The unit of analysis was the individual posting, and each posting received one code. During the coding process, the ascii art postings created a problem for using qualitative data analysis software; therefore, we manually coded each posting using database software and used spreadsheet software for our analysis. The database
software was subsequently used for managing and interpreting the data for qualitative analysis. All ascii art postings, trolls, and empty postings were omitted.

The second author and a coder working independently determined the category of each posting for all five threads. The intercoder agreement for the 16 categories was acceptable (96%); disagreements, mainly in determining which postings were to be omitted and which were to be categorized into category 9 (Other), were resolved among the coders and first author. The coding results quantified the frequency of occurrence of the 16 categories over five phases of the same discussion, the anti-war and execution video thread.

As postings or URL links tend to be copied by subsequent postings, the coders also determined when a posting associated with Shosei Koda first appeared, in order to facilitate interpretation of the five threads in the qualitative analysis. Qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret transitions in the emotions of Channel 2 users through analyzing the difference in language used in postings in the threads. The qualitative analysis also attempted to interpret the mindset of the Channel 2 users who accessed the gruesome execution files of Shosei Koda and also of the users who did not, and how that mindset shifted (or not).

**The Koda Execution Case**

Shosei Koda was a 24-year-old male from Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan. He entered Iraq in October 2004 by land via Anman, Jordan. His objectives in entering Iraq at the time were tourism and “finding himself” by traveling. However, he was kidnapped by Iraqi terrorists and became the first Japanese hostage to be videotaped being beheaded on October 29, 2004. The event was widely covered in the mainstream media in Japan and on the Internet.

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**Table 1 Categories of thread postings**

| 1. Criticism of Koda’s actions |
| 2. Prayers for safety/worrying about Koda |
| 3. Anticipation of the Koda execution video |
| 4. Anxiety/fear about the Koda execution video |
| 5. Attacks of those anticipating the Koda video |
| 6. Information provision |
| 7. Circulation of false information |
| 8. Banter about Koda |
| 9. Other (neutral opinions, comments) |
| 10. Mourning over Koda’s death |
| 11. Anger toward terrorism |
| 12. Questions |
| 13. Fusiana traps |
| 14. Remote hosting |
| 15. Veriﬁcation |
| 16. Terror-politics-war |
The News Flow of Events Leading to the Execution of Shosei Koda
The following is a summary of the flow of events that led to the execution of Shosei Koda, according to a cross referencing of stories published in Mainichi Newspaper and Asahi Newspaper between October and November 2004:

October 27, 2004 (before dawn, Japan Standard Time [JST]) The “al-Qaida Organisation of Holy War in Iraq” begins webcasting video images claiming that they have captured a Japanese hostage.

October 29, 2004 (before dawn, JST) The deadline addressed by the terrorist group ordering the Japanese Self Defense Force to withdraw from Iraq—48 hours—is past.

October 29, 2004 (before noon, JST) German news services begin reporting that a dead body with Asian features was found in the city of Tikrit in northern Iraq.

October 29, 2004 (evening, JST) Japanese Foreign Minister Machimura announces to reporters that according to the Japanese Embassy in Iraq, the dead body found (in Tikrit) is not likely to be Shosei Koda.

October 30, 2004 (dawn, JST) U.S. military forces in Iraq notify the Japanese Embassy in Iraq that a body matching characteristics of Shosei Koda was found in Balad, located between Baghdad and Tikrit.

October 30, 2004 (dawn, JST) Hatsuhisa Takashima (Press Secretary/Director-General for Press and Public Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs) holds a press conference announcing that a Japanese body matching Shosei Koda’s description was found in Balad.

October 30, 2004 (noon, JST) A U.S. military cargo plane carrying the body arrives in Kuwait. A medical official of the Japanese Embassy in Kuwait inspects the body.

October 30, 2004 (afternoon, JST) Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiroyuki Hosoda confirms that from the evidence found the body is not that of Shosei Koda.

October 31, 2004 (before dawn, JST) The Iraqi Ministry of Health reports that the body of Shosei Koda has been found.

October 31, 2004 (late morning, JST) Japanese Foreign Minister Machimura holds a press conference announcing that the body of Shosei Koda was found in Baghdad and was confirmed through fingerprints.

November 3, 2004 (noon, JST) The body of Shosei Koda arrives at Fukuoka Airport.

November 4, 2004 (evening JST) Through the Tokyo Legal Affairs Bureau, the Japanese Ministry of Justice requests that the operator of an Internet forum terminate circulation of pictures of Shosei Koda’s dead body because it is violating human rights and emotionally tormenting the bereaved family.

The Channel 2 Flow of Postings Associated with the Execution of Shosei Koda
The flow of initial postings associated with the execution of Shosei Koda in Channel 2 is as follows:

October 31, 2004 (03:32 JST) A link leading to what are supposedly pictures of the body of Shosei Koda is posted.
October 31, 2004 (13:22 JST) A link to CNN Online reporting the finding of Shosei Koda’s body is posted.

November 2, 2004 (13:56 JST) The link to the video image of Shosei Koda’s execution is posted.

November 2, 2004 (15:41 JST) Links to the video capture jpegs are posted.

November 2, 2004 (15:49 JST) News and comments on the video of Shosei Koda begin getting posted on the Channel 2 threads.

November 2, 2004 (18:53 JST) The authenticity of the video file is confirmed.

November 2, 2004 (19:33 JST) The video image is copied for redistribution on a different server.

November 2, 2004 (19:48 JST) Warnings are attached to the link on the threads.

November 4, 2004 (03:23 JST) The links to the video of Shosei Koda are added to the template posting collection.

November 8, 2004 (21:04 JST) The template is erased from the template posting collection.

The Anti-War and Execution Video Thread (Kubikiridougawomite Sensouhantaisurusure)
The following are approximate translations (Japanese to English) of characteristic postings that exemplify each category:

1. **Criticism of Koda’s actions.** “The reason why Koda was in Iraq was obvious, he was backpacking. He wanted to see what a nation at war would be like. He only had U.S.$100 and tried to get on the bus with U.S. $20. Unbelievable. He was denied accommodations at a hotel, but he probably tried to stay at the hotel with U.S. $10. Did he think he would get special treatment because he was Japanese? He was even wearing short pants. That’s like saying I am a foreigner, please kidnap me. Unbelievably stupid…”

2. **Prayers for safety/worrying about Koda.** “Koda is an idiot, but I hope he gets saved!! Although if he gets saved, everyone in Japan will really be angry with him. How could they [terrorists] be so cruel? Some of them still must have family, how can anyone become so cold [comments about executions].”

3. **Anticipation of the Koda execution video.** “Let’s hope the videos come out soon, while the topic is still hot.”

4. **Anxiety/fear about the Koda execution video.** “If possible, I’d rather not see Koda’s beheading. I don’t understand what he did, but I don’t want to see another Japanese get his head cut off.”

5. **Attacks of those anticipating the Koda video.** “He’ll probably get executed. I’ll feel really ashamed if there are still postings cavorting about his execution after seeing the videos. What ever happened to the morals of the Japanese?”

Circulation of false information. “‘The demands were refused so they said they will kill me.’ And after saying that, they tied his arms, shot him in the back and in the head with a gun. No beheading. The gun was a handgun.”

Banter about Koda. “‘His head will get chopped off and separated and he’ll be happy!”

Other (neutral opinions, comments) “I am not sure what will happen next?”

Mourning over Koda’s death. “‘I knew this was going to happen to him when he got caught. He must have regretted going to Iraq so many times before his execution. I feel sorry for his parents.”

Anger toward terrorism. “‘The guys who beheaded him should get beheaded themselves.”

Questions. “‘Although it’s censored on the mainstream news, there really is an execution video of Shosei Koda, right?” or “‘How do you open a zip file?”

Fusiana traps. “‘If you write fusianasan in your name field, you can make your postings totally anonymous and untraceable.” (When you type “fusianasan” in the name field with your posting, this is actually a code that reveals your IP address. In essence, this is a “trap” that reveals your IP address in the name field of your posting. Due to the large increase in novice users that occurs during certain events, some of the seasoned Channel 2 users played this trick on novice users to make them reveal their IP address.)

Remote hosting. “‘Check out the video at http://www….” (This is another trap that is common on shady Japanese websites. URLs or website links are posted, disguised as links to websites where the user can find what he or she is searching for. Instead, the link jumps to a website that displays the user’s IP address, Internet service provider, and other information accessible from the user’s computer. The website also threatens the user with an outrageous “membership fee” to be wired to the website owner immediately.)

Verification. “‘This execution was probably at the secret base of the terrorists. It looks like it’s inside a room and immediately after the execution.”

Terror-politics-war. “‘Koda has probably been executed already. I can’t imagine him getting saved.”

Table 2 shows the frequency of each category in each of the five threads.

Thread Part 11 (October 27-October 31) coincides with the initial release of the hostage video of Shosei Koda. There were as yet not many postings on Shosei Koda during this time period, relatively speaking, because news of Shosei Koda’s kidnapping had not yet diffused widely. In Part 12 (October 30-November 1), a beheaded Asian was in news reports and with this, anticipation postings and mourning postings increased. In thread Part 13 (October 31-November 2), many newcomers and novice users unfamiliar with the thread or Channel 2 rules began posting entries. During Part 14 (November 2, 03:44 JST through November 2, 19:38 JST), numerous fake links to fake video sites gave rise to skepticism toward postings claiming new information about the videos. At this time, the Channel 2
community was still calm while waiting for verification of the links to the actual video.

Once the videos were confirmed to be real, there was an increase in postings by users mourning Koda’s death. The link posted (Part 14, posting number 680) to the server with the Koda execution video had extremely heavy traffic, so most users in the community waited. By postings 810 and 848 of Part 14, some users began reporting successful downloading of the video. By posting 876 of Part 14 (November 2, 19:15 JST), the videos had been verified, the files uploaded onto different “uploaders,” and users began downloading the files.

However, some users were not able to view the videos due to anxiety about them, and some reported regret after watching the video files (“I feel really sick and shocked after actually seeing his head being chopped off”). In Part 15 (November 2, 19:44 JST through November 3, 02:50 JST), many of the users had downloaded the execution files, and comments and opinion exchange continued. Futility, chagrin, sadness, and anger were commonly expressed in the posted comments, as illustrated by comments
Opinions on war, terror, and politics continued to be posted, and discussions on these topics intensified. Comments questioning the premises of the war, such as “What is the real reason behind this war anyway?” and “Why are people committing these acts of terror?,” began to appear. At the same time, many newcomers to Channel 2, including novice Internet users, began participating in the Koda thread.

In this sequence of events, the execution video attracted much attention. However, it also inspired the users to limit or stop access to “uploaders” distributing the execution videos; in other words, it prompted voluntary ethical moderation by the user community. Postings expressing remorse and attempting moderation swelled in frequency and ultimately predominated. Comments like “You people shouldn’t put links to this!” or “Don’t you feel any remorse over the execution of a fellow Japanese human being?” and “Let’s track down these human trash distributing the files and confront them in real life” illustrate the attempts by Channel 2 users to moderate the forum.

We classified antisocial postings as “agitation,” cynical postings as “neutral,” and pro-social postings and postings of criticism as “moderation.” In thread Part 11, the number of postings that could be categorized as agitation was higher than moderation, but by thread Part 15, this order was reversed, with a sharp increase in postings that advocated ethical pro-social moderation and a decrease in postings of agitation, as shown in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, one can observe how users first discussed this topic with agitation, but how the postings were directed toward ethical moderation by a large portion of the users following exposure to the murder files. In turn, the large number of postings attempting to moderate the postings of agitation led to a significant decrease in antisocial postings.

Although one may consider this case to be an exception or an anomaly, the dynamics we uncovered through our analysis constitute a somewhat startling example of how a failure in the “bad” Internet elicited some “good” from society. This case exhibits how content that highly violated morality and ethics appeared and how a self-regulating mechanism by the user community functioned pro-socially in an uncontrolled, anonymous Internet forum, without requiring any external regulation.

Discussion

Is Channel 2 a Provider of “Harm”?

This study initiated investigation based on the assumption that the asocial-antisocial perception of CMC may have been a preconception, and that through careful examination, some pro-social aspects might be observable in the Channel 2 Japanese Internet forum. The study concentrated on the dynamics involved in video file-sharing among users of the forum, and specifically on the dissemination of the alarming images and video files of the October 2004 Japanese hostage murder in Iraq.
A thematic content analysis and a qualitative analysis of November 2004 Channel 2 threads and postings about dissemination of images and video files of the actual hostage murder were conducted.

The results of the analyses showed that Channel 2 users first discussed the topic with agitation by posting links to the murder files or banter about the topic (asocial-antisocial), and how eventually postings were directed into ethical moderation (pro-social) in a way that discouraged users with lower moral or ethical standards from continuing to post links or banter. The self-regulating trend emerged especially among seasoned users who had actual exposure to the murder files, and the majority began accepting the ethical moderation, allowing it to continue and permeate the forum. The trend we found in the data resembled how a tide rips and then becomes an ebb and flow. That is, new information about the hostage video posting arrived and there was a clash of agitation and moderation, then agitating posting of links to the murder files were scorned by the moderators and other users, eventually discouraging further postings of links to the murder files.

In this respect, even though it may have been for a limited time and in a limited context, we believe the Channel 2 Internet forum was acting in a way that corresponded to Habermas’ (1974) notion of a public sphere, with citizens trying to reach consensus through open debate. For this brief moment, the Channel 2 Internet forum displayed some potential to form a pro-social, virtual public sphere. In this case, Channel 2 users were reaching a consensus to mourn the death of the hostage, Shosei Koda. This contradicts Poster (1997), who argued against the possibility of
a virtual public sphere due to the lack of accountability, lack of trust due to anonymity, and abundance of disagreement among users of online discussion forums. The results also partially contradict prior criticism that a “virtual” public sphere could not be realized on the Internet because of the Internet’s fragmented (Papacharissi, 2002) and “individualistic” (Dahlberg, 2001) nature.

Ethos in Chaos?
Further research is necessary to generalize beyond this case study, and more investigation is needed to determine all the particulars of this dynamic. Clearly, not all of the incidents/events discussed in the Channel 2 Internet forum reflect an emergence of online ethics or a sense of justice. The involvement of Channel 2 users in this case was perhaps due to Shosei Koda being the first Japanese hostage to be executed in the war in Iraq; as such, it triggered feelings of shock resulting in a strong impetus toward moderation in the forum. Still, the results of this study are noteworthy and demonstrate how Internet bulletin board users, of their own accord, began to moderate the dissemination of alarming visual images by expressing their reactions after viewing the files. We believe that these were attempts at reaching a consensus within the Channel 2 community, and because the trend led in a pro-social direction (mourning), we believe that the community was successful in its efforts.

Unfortunately, not all such images are treated this way, and critics may object that the results of this study are due to the extremely violent nature of the execution video and the feelings of identification among the users because the victim was Japanese. One cannot deny that in other cases, horrifying images and videos are accessed and distributed freely by Internet users. As the Internet does not have a unified regulating or governing body that sets guidelines for what is allowed or not allowed, revolting or shocking images that can be considered to be socially harmful are common on the Internet. The flow of such socially harmful images and videos through the Internet has effectively nullified all attempts by the Japanese government and associated organizations to regulate and keep such content from reaching the average citizen.

The Internet has often been blamed for promoting the decline of traditional ethics in Japan. This claim may be based in part on the abundance of illegal pornography that is easily accessible on the Internet. The traditional Japanese ethics of avoiding shame and not bringing disgrace to oneself or family seem nonexistent when one browses the digital content found in the Internet, which has no self-imposed codes or regulations. The legal system in Japan, as in other nations, has constantly lagged behind developments in information and communication technologies. In contrast to broadcast televised visual content, which operates under the telecommunications policy guidelines of each nation, the Internet bypasses the “constraints” of national borders, and unethical or illegal images are exchanged freely among users without much control. One example is the easy access to illegal pornography over the Internet, which often violates Japanese legal standards that
prohibit displaying images of adult human genitals. Channel 2 has been more of a catalyst than an inhibitor of illegal pornography in Japan, along with other criminal activities.

Channel 2 has also been a forum for venting hatred and discrimination against other members of society. Thirty minutes spent reading the postings on Channel 2 can be enough to turn some people away in disgust, never to access the forum again. Free access and anonymity shelter the identities of those who post entries, so that the content of Channel 2 often reflects the most unsightly aspects of human communication behavior. Such postings would never have been accessible to the public otherwise, due to the strict ethical codes that are observed by all other media. Therefore, in most situations, Channel 2 may be considered the largest failure of media ethics in Japan.

The significance of the findings of this study is based on the common view towards Channel 2 and how it is regarded as a failure of media ethics. Prior activity on Channel 2 would have led to the prediction that the execution videos of Shosei Koda would have infested Channel 2, with postings of links in all sorts of different threads. Instead, the users of Channel 2 repudiated the information as if it were a contagion, and the moderators and users began to act as a type of collective-social immune system in an attempt to eradicate the germ-like information. The emergence of a collective ethical “conscience” that was not enforced by the government or legal system illustrated how members of society can act together in cyberspace and—without any prearrangement or overseer—collectively distinguish “good” from “bad.”

We believe that a community ethos that upholds human dignity emerged among the users who accessed, downloaded, and viewed the files. Collectively and without any coordination, they acted as a self-regulating safeguard mechanism. Some may consider the collective acts and behavior that characterized this incident to have a distinctly Japanese cultural aspect. However, we believe that this kind of dynamic in response to such files may transcend cultures and be the result of a more fundamental, human mechanism.

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Notes

1 The Japanese name for the forum, ni-channeru, has been translated variously into English as Channel 2, Ch2, the two-channel, the 2 Channel, or the 2Ch. Following Onishi (2004), in this article we use the term Channel 2.
7 A unique aspect of Japanese Internet access is that 19% of the users only access the Internet from cellular phones or mobile devices, in contrast to 26.5% of the users who access the Internet from personal computers. Both types of access are used by 52.9%; the remaining users access the Internet from game consoles or television. Furthermore, the information on Channel 2 is easily accessible from web-enabled cellular phones, which constitute a large majority of cellular phones in Japan, so many children have little shielding from this information source.
8 Channel 2 is non-commercial and is run by volunteers and banner advertisement fees.
9 Trolls and off-topic postings are tolerated on Channel 2 but spamming and flooding are not.
10 The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology periodically holds symposia that address how the Internet promotes loneliness and antisocial behavior, such as involvement in cybersex, porn, and online gambling. Retrieved July 19, 2007 from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/sports/ikusei/030301cd.htm
11 Filtering software is not a total solution to providing a wholesome Internet environment. Altering a URL or bypassing keyword filters are easy ways to overcome being filtered, and new keywords are used in place of the older ones to outsmart filtering software. The Internet is not a static environment, and ordinances will always run the risk of becoming obsolete in addressing these issues.

References


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