The Internet: An (other) agent that disseminates Japanese 'soft power' resources

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The popularity of the Internet has affected international politics in many ways; however, it is seemingly overlooked by most scholars, and in particular, realists who view the Internet as low-politics. This article argues that the impact of the Internet on international politics should not be underestimated. By focusing on the capabilities of the Internet in general and P2P networks in particular, this paper shows how the Internet is able to disseminate soft power resources. This is demonstrated by an examination of the dissemination of Japanese soft power resources through BitTorrent. Finally, it is concluded that the Internet is a plausible agent for distributing the resources of soft power; however, once disseminated, soft power resources do not always transform into soft power. In the end, contextual conditions within states always apply.

Keywords: Japan, soft power resources, Internet, BitTorrent

Introduction

The invention of new technology has always changed international politics in some way. The creation of the atomic bomb led to a period of long peace because it became a deterrent among states as well as an indicator of material capabilities. In fact, military power is always a factor in technological innovation and information technology is no exception. Information technology in general and the Internet in particular was originally invented for military purposes in order to create technology that could function even if some of its parts had been destroyed. In contrast to previous technologies, the usage of the Internet has not been limited to the military sector; instead, it has been commercialized and individualized. Moreover, the nature of the Internet derived from the motivations for its development—namely, no centrality and no ownership—has led to its application by various actors with different intentions.

Anyone, can access this new medium anywhere by adopting TCP/IP, the protocol of the Internet. Thus, the Internet is arguably the most powerful technology in the post-Cold War era. The popularization of the Internet has brought about the rapid development of devices and software based on the function of the Internet for commercial purposes. The peer-to-peer (P2P) system is one of these developments. The developers of this system adopted the logic of the Internet network as the systems defining characteristics; therefore, decentralization is one of P2P system's most notable features. In addition, the P2P network system boosts the capability of the Internet in that it provides autonomous resource sharing which enables speedy transference of information among Internet users. Many types of software rely on this system. BitTorrent, for instance, is widely used among Internet users, especially younger users (Chadwick 2006).

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Although the Internet is extensively commercialized and individualized, the space of the Internet is still influenced by the state. Although the study of state behavior at the international level tends to focus on hard powers, the other types of power cannot be totally neglected. Even Carr, a prominent realist, insists on the importance of non-hard powers, which he called power over opinion (2001). The power over opinion is now widely known under the new label 'soft power': a term newly introduced and re-conceptualized by Joseph Nye. According to Nye, soft power is 'attractive power…[which has] the ability to shape the preferences of other(s)…[by] getting others to want the outcomes that you want—(it) co-opts people rather than coerces them' (2004: 5-6). The soft power of states comes from three resources—namely, culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye 2004). In that regard, the Internet can be seen as a medium by which these resources are unintentionally disseminated, especially cultural resources.

Apart from the US, Japan has more potential resources of soft power than any other state (Nye 2004). Japanese soft power resources, especially culture in general and pop culture in particular, have a large global consumer base, because, as McGray indicates, Japan is now a cultural superpower, and it 'has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower' (2002: 47). Furthermore, since the 1990s, cultural resources have provided the basis for a strategy of Japanese public diplomacy. In addition, the cultural resources used by the government have reached a wide audience through the Internet and have taken various forms, which are extensively shared through P2P networks by Internet users, especially in East Asia. In this regard, Japan is an explicit example of the relations between soft powers of the state and the Internet.

By using the case of Japan, this article will examine the potential of the Internet and P2P networks in particular as a medium that disseminates soft power resources of the state—resources which are mostly products of non-state actors. This article will also provide examples of Japanese soft power resources, including idiosyncrasy, found on the Internet. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the effectiveness of the Internet as a channel for propagating soft power resources is not measurable; consequently, only the analysis of 'plausibility' is feasible. Toward this end, this article is divided into three parts. The first part lays out the framework of the relationship between soft power resources and the Internet. The second part considers the Japanese soft power resources and the impact of these powers on international politics. The last part examines the characteristics of P2P networks in general and BitTorrent in particular as well as their function as a mode of dissemination of Japanese soft power resources.

Soft Power Resources and the Internet

The theories and practices of international politics have been dominated by realism which simply focuses on the state and its military capabilities as a unit of analysis. However, the roles of other actors, such as firms and individuals, are often neglected by realists who dismiss the direct implications between non-state actors and the international system. This is not to deny the fact that the state is a principal actor and that the international system regulates state behavior. However, these narrow explanations are inadequate in the information age. The other actors and their unintentional functions should be included and not underestimated. From this perspective, the actors ignored in theories and practices, for example, entertainment firms and the Internet users, can be seen as agents that can reproduce and raise the soft power resources of states, especially cultural-power states like Japan.

Although a state might possess plentiful soft power resources, this does not necessarily mean that the state has soft power. Take Pokémonization for instance. Despite the fact that Pokémon, a Japanese game, has become pervasive in American and East Asian marketplaces

and has become a global brand (Allison 2006), the popularity of Pokémon, as Nye pointed out, does not 'assure that Japan will get the policy outcomes it wishes' (2004: 12). Thus, soft power resources do not necessarily transform into soft power because the effectiveness of the resources depends upon contextual conditions. Nonetheless, the private sources of soft power like cultural innovations seem to have more effect than government-initiated ones (Nye 2004).

The impacts of globalization and digital revolutions are utterly advantageous to soft power resources, particularly pop culture and entertainment elements because they compress space and time. In this sense, geographical obstacles no longer exist. People in the UK can watch the latest episode of a Japanese soap via any Internet browser. Moreover, Internet users can decide what, when, where, and how they want to consume. In this sense, soft power resources can be delivered to overseas targets anytime.

It should be mentioned that a significant characteristic of information technology, which disseminates soft power resources, is the possibility of illegality since the Internet lacks central control. Therefore, Internet users can share various types of files—including illegal files—with other users on the web. The emergence of the BitTorrent P2P network boosts these activities in that Internet users can download and upload huge files like HD movies and PC games in a short span time. This unique feature of the Internet threatens the profits of many businesses, but, conversely, it offers a great channel for states to capitalize on their cultural assets in order to gain potential soft power.

Thus, the Internet provides a channel for a government to present their national image on its official homepage—an image they can construct any way they want. The homepage of a government also furnishes information about their soft power resources derived from its political values and foreign policies. The MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan) homepage emphasizes Japan's stance on global issues—namely, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, climate change, biodiversity, and millennium development goals. Japanese policies on these issues encourage positive impressions and prestige as well as producing soft power resources since the policies promote peace and human security. In addition, the MOFA homepage spotlights Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is a famous Japanese aid program that offers assistance to weak states throughout the world. The homepage also includes content relating to Japanese culture and public diplomacy. The significance of a government homepage is best captured by Nye who argues that, 'cyber information can also travel through cyberspace to create soft power by attracting citizens in another country. A public diplomacy campaign over the Internet is an example' (2010: 6).

However, public attraction to official information on government websites must not be overestimated, because many people are not interested in foreign affairs as they seem to affect domestic politics only indirectly. Instead, entertainment media from soap operas to pop music to adult videos appeal to Internet users. Therefore, entertainment elements attract a wider audience on the Internet than official contents.

The attraction of soft power resources, however, hinges on the socio-cultural context. Japanese soaps might be nonsense in the eyes of British audiences, while British movies might not appeal to Japanese audiences. Apart from socio-cultural differences, generational gaps also factor into what resources are consumed. In that regard, the usage of the Internet seems too complex for the elderly. They tend to prefer 'old-fashioned' technology, such as TV and radio. Consequently, soft power resources are often only attractive to a specific demographic.

In conclusion, soft power resources and the Internet have a mutually beneficial relationship in that the former utilizes the latter as an efficient medium to reach a wider audience, while the latter boosts the popularity of the former as well as reproducing it through file sharing on the web and P2P networks. In regard to the state, the popularization and democratiza-

tion of the Internet also increases the importance of soft power because soft power has the potential to sway public opinion among citizens in another state (Weiss 2005).

Japanese Soft Power Resources and Its Implications

Japan has plentiful soft power resources derived from cultural resources and economic prosperity. According to Nye, 'Japan has more potential soft power resources than any other Asian country. It is the first non-Western country that was able to fully modernize to the point of equality with the West in income and technology while showing that it is possible to maintain a unique culture. …[T]oday Japan ranks… (as) the first in the world in number of patents… second in book sales and music sales… second in the number of Internet hosts… (and) second in high-tech exports…' (Nye 2004: 85) Nevertheless, the Japanese economy peaked during the 1980s, and Japan fell into 'the Lost Decade'. The economic unease was an impediment to being an economic superpower. However, the effect of this should not be exaggerated since Japan is still the strongest economic power in the East Asian region, and Japan is one of the biggest donors of financial support to various international organizations, such as UNESCO. Moreover, Japan's aid programs have expanded throughout weak and poor regions—namely, Southeast Asia and Africa. Thus, despite its economic stagnation, Japan is a major economic power.

Although Japan has faced economic misfortune since the end of the 1980s, it is a superpower in other aspects—namely, culture. Japan's cultural richness gives it an advantage over other states in terms of soft power resources. In addition, Japan's economic base ensures the prosperity of Japanese cultural resources. Nevertheless, in the context of this article, cultural richness does not only mean a traditional culture which can be traced back to its ancient societies but also includes newly-created modern Japanese cultural resources seen in everyday life: its pop culture.

What is the Japanese pop culture? Is it a fashion or music or *manga* (comics)? This question is difficult to answer because Japanese pop culture is a contested concept. Nonetheless, this article argues that Japanese pop culture can be understood as the production of 'cuteness'. According to McVeigh, cuteness or *Kawaii* is hard to define because 'asking Japanese about cuteness was similar to inquiring about beauty or love. It's just something one knows and knows about' (2000, p. 138). That being said, in a general context 'cuteness is a concept of great cultural ubiquity and is often used to characterize objects (toys, small things), persons (children, young girls, women), behavior (certain words, facial expressions), an attitude (one's feeling toward a thing or person) and even handwriting and slang' (McVeigh 2000:137). Despite their multivocality and ambiguity, cute objects, according to McVeigh, 'are encountered everywhere in Japan. Whether in advertising, company logos, greeting cards, pornography or in the posters of state-sponsored public safety campaigns, brightly-coloured balloons, baby faces, smiling children, tiny bunnies and beaming bears are used to inform, warn, advise, admonish and shape opinion' (2000: 135). Thus, cuteness takes diverse forms: child, teen, and adult cuteness; pornography and child pornography cuteness; corporate and authority cuteness (McVeigh: 2000).

Nevertheless, cuteness is not just about being cute and cool—it can help some people achieve goals. In other words, despite being mostly personal, cuteness is also political. In a domestic context, McVeigh points out that cuteness has ideological and sensory aspects which are associated and forged unconsciously, and cuteness is related to fundamental norms of Japanese society—namely, hierarchy, obedience, and empathy (2000). Authority cuteness, utilized by the Japanese government, is the explicit example. According to McVeigh, the Japanese state and its agencies 'attempt to associate themselves with smiling babies, innocent children, talking animals, pretty colours, innocent funny creatures and *akarui* (cheerful)

things. If those in positions of power can convince those below them that they are in fact not intimidating, the task of persuading, influencing and controlling them becomes easier. In advertising, for instance, powerful people and institutions make themselves appear weak by employing images of women' (2000: 150). The function of authority cuteness is, therefore, to soften the sentiment of authority power (McVeigh 2000).

The function of authority cuteness is a common feature at both domestic and international levels. For instance, Doraemon, a famous Japanese *manga* robot-cat character, has been used by MOFA since the 1990s in propaganda which aims to soften international tensions between Japan and other states. In addition, Captain Tsubasa, a popular soccer *manga*, was used as a symbol of Japanese goodwill in order to soften the image of the Self Defense Force (SDF) missions in Iraq and to help mitigate the potentiality of negative reactions from Arab states to Japan (Lam 2007). Because Japan has an abundance of potential soft power resources, the MOFA employs cute cultural objects as part of its public diplomacy as seen in an official report which states that 'Japanese culture is diverse, characterized by traditional culture… as well as by… *anime*, *manga* [(comics)], and fashion. Japanese culture is currently attracting attention around the world as "Cool Japan". In order to increase interest in Japan and further heighten the image of Japan, MOFA is working with the private sector through overseas diplomatic establishments and the Japan Foundation to promote cultural exchanges...' (Diplomatic Bluebook, 2006). In addition, the MOFA has initiated the Pop Culture diplomacy as part of its public diplomacy by promoting its pop culture, such as *anime* and *manga*, to younger generations in other states. The Pop Culture diplomacy has also launched international contests, for example, the International Manga Award, in order to stimulate people overseas to adopt Japanese pop culture. In addition to Doraemon, there is also the Anime Ambassadors project, launched in 2008. The first Anime Ambassador of Japan was appointed by the MOFA. Finally, the most recent effort initiated by the Pop Culture diplomacy is the Ambassadors of Cute: Three young ladies appointed as the cute ambassadors whose task is travelling aboard and promoting Japanese pop culture to young people around the world. In the beginning, the MOFA 'initially focuses on three genres: Lolita, Harajuku, and school uniforms. The styles are very minutely defined, and each genre has its own legion of devotees. We're considering adding more *Kawaii* Ambassadors if we can find suitable individuals representing other genres' (Public Relations Office 2009). It is important to note that the Japanese government did not create these images of pop culture. Japanese diplomatic efforts use existing cultural resources in order to create soft power resources. Consequently, soft power resources are 'not the product of a pre-planned strategy' (Otmazgin 2008: 82-83).

Apart from the aforementioned genres of Japanese soft power resources, there are other genres which have high potential for creating soft power but have been neglected by academia—namely, porn-related articles, such as adult videos (AV), teen and junior idols, and adult *manga*. These must not be underestimated since they are widely consumed, particularly in East Asia, although most are consumed illegally since pornography is against the law in many states, such as Thailand. Because child, teen, adult, and sexy cuteness can be seen in pornography and child pornography cuteness, people overseas who consume this material, therefore, more or less tend have a general perception of Japan that reflects the images of Japanese cuteness. Moreover, very often the models in porn-related materials dress as Lolita or in school girl uniforms. These images along with the adult *manga*—collections of drawings of cute Japanese femininity from school girls to housewives—are not very different from the appearances of the Japanese Ambassadors of Cuteness. All of these images, the models in the porn-related materials, the *adult* manga, and the Japanese Ambassadors of Cuteness, depict Japanese daily life as a fantasy. It is important to note that cute masculinities are also present

in porn-related materials in many genres, such as homosexually-oriented adult videos, idols, and *manga*.

Why is Japan the mecca of such material? Perhaps, it derives from the fact that Japan is one of only a few Asian states with a legal adult entertainment industry; moreover, child pornography has only been prohibited in Japan since the 1990s. Despite this recent prohibition of child pornography, there are still junior idols: child or early-teen photographic models. These models are often viewed as semi child-pornographic subjects since the models have to perform somewhat erotic activities such as taking showers in tiny swimsuits or acting in rather sexy and cute ways, which could lead to sexual arousal. It should be acknowledged that not only are girls junior idols but boys who have feminine cuteness can also be junior idols. Thus, Japan is presenting an overall softer image and is being perceived as such by consumers. The image of a softer Japan is far removed from its brutal militaristic image during the Second World War.

Although Japanese porn-related materials are very popular among people overseas, particularly East Asian people, how much is being consumed is difficult to measure, because there is no empirical evidence to support analysis since porn-related materials are concealed within the private sphere. As a result, pornography has been left out of soft power resources analysis. Nevertheless, because soft power resources have the potential to shape consumer opinion of a state, discounting an influential soft power resource (i.e., porn-related materials) results in incomplete analysis. Furthermore, with today's information technology, porn-related materials and other soft power resources are widely disseminated via the Internet and BitTorrent in particular. Thus, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Japanese soft power, porn-related materials—the forgotten resource—cannot be ignored. Moreover, the Internet, especially P2P networks like BitTorrent, boosts the popularity of Japan's soft power resources since it enables Internet users to access these resources easily, with speed, and at no cost.

BitTorrent and the dissemination of the Japanese Soft Power Resources

The previous section examined a variety of Japanese soft power resources which are rooted in the production of cuteness, from authority cuteness to pornography cuteness. The spreadability of these resources has increased significantly owing to the development of the Internet and, in particular, the development of P2P networks. According to Buford and Yu, the common characteristics of most P2P networks are resource sharing, networking, decentralization, symmetry, autonomy, self-organization, scalability, and stability (2010). BitTorrent is one of the P2P networks and, according to Buford and Yu, it can be described as 'an unstructured overlay used for distributing large files in pieces using mutual distribution of the pieces between a set of peers called a swarm. (BitTorrent) uses a server to store the torrent and another server called a tracker to identify the swarm members' (2010: 5). When compared with other P2P networks, BitTorrent is favoured among Internet users because it offers 'ordinary people abilities that were once far beyond their capabilities—the chance to create large-scale distribution networks that can spring, fully formed, from the modems of ordinary consumers' (Hunt 2010: 8). Another crucial reason that makes BitTorrent popular is as a potential aid in piracy. In Thailand, for example, it has become the medium used by Internet users for downloading pirated and illegal files, such as movies and pornographic videos.

Other P2P-network technologies have been declining in popularity, but BitTorrent has become even more popular. This is because of the 'democratization' of BitTorrent—the users determine how BitTorrent is used, which makes it unique. BitTorent, Hunt points out, has its own characteristics (Hunt 2010). It decentralizes the P2P file-sharing systems that relied previously on a single server and, more importantly, while other software has some commercial

objectives, BitTorrent 'concentrated solely on producing the technology and software; what it was then used for was down to its users' (Hunt 2010: 10). In addition, BitTorrent distributes large files at no extra cost as its principle function—'the more people who want a file, the faster the distribution occurs…[and therefore] connection speeds are…determined by the wealth of individuals' (Hunt 2010: 12). These favourable features contribute toward the popularity of BitTorrent.

P2P networks and BitTorrent in particular can feasibly disseminate Japanese soft power resources. Such claims should not be viewed as exaggerative because of the popularity and capability of these file-sharing systems. According to the research of De Boever and De Grooff (2010), the majority of content downloaded through BitTorrent is entertainment—namely, video content (57%) and music content (35%) (see Figure 1). De Boever and De Grooff conclude that 'the bittorent network is mainly used to download large files such as movies, TV series and entire music albums' (2010). Nevertheless, the research conducted by De Boever and De Grooff did not specify the types of movies. Their data only showed the categories in general. However, this is to be expected because of the aforementioned limitations of collecting evidence of consumption of porn-related materials. Despite this limitation, it is clear that P2P networks and BitTorrent in particular and the Internet in general can disseminate the soft power resources of Japan.

This is more true in East Asia than any other region owing to the social and cultural contextual similarities among these states. Furthermore, the scarcity of law enforcement regarding issues of copyright in East Asian states such as Thailand and China, is a factor that increases the tendency of the usage of P2P networks. Finally, the importance of the Internet and a desire for higher incomes leads to the democratization of the Internet among East Asian citizens.

Figure 1 Type of BitTorrent contents
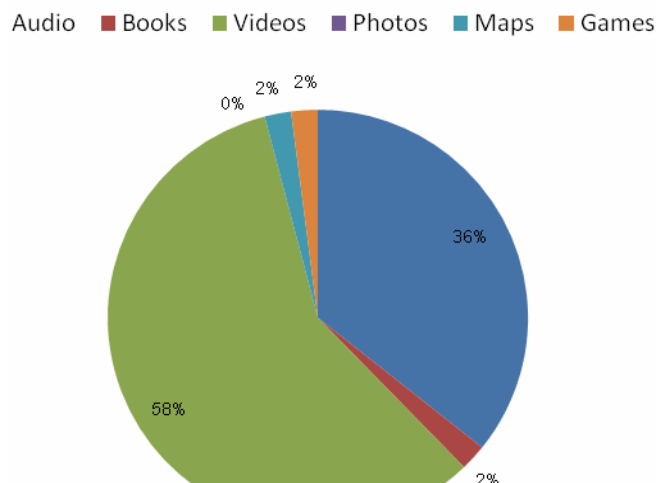
Source: Jorn De Boever and Dirk De Grooff (2010), p. 99

Despite the dissemination of the Japanese soft power resources, which is aided by the Internet, the image citizens in other countries have of Japan varies. As a poll conducted by Yomiuri Shimbun in 2006 indicated, 91% of Thais perceived Japan as trustworthy, and 87.8% of Indonesians trusted Japan, while only 10.9% of Korean people help a positive image of Japan (see Figure 2) (Lam 2007: 362). The different perceptions of Japan among these states are

likely derived from their varied circumstances, such as history; therefore, soft power resources are inadequate at helping to spread positive perceptions of Japan.

Figure 2 Perception of Japan—Question to 6 Asian countries: Can Japan be trusted?
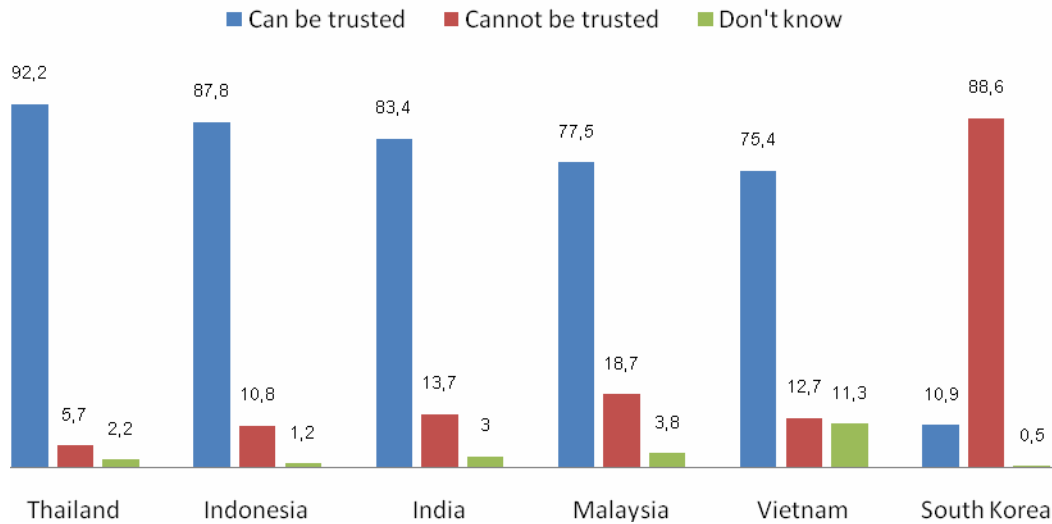
Source: cited from Lam (2007), p. 362

Conclusion

Despite the fact that military and economic powers are the main indicators of the capabilities of the state, the importance of soft power cannot be neglected. Among major powers, Japan has more potential soft power resources ranging from *manga* to music to pornography. The resources can be traced back to the production of cuteness, which is seen in Japanese daily life from teen cuteness to authority cuteness. Consequently, Japanese public diplomatic efforts, such as the Ambassador of Cute, are not pre-planned strategies, but rather are existing popular cultural resources that the Japanese government applies as authority cuteness in order to influence its foreign policy.

At the same time, the popularization and democratization of the Internet gives significant advantages to the dissemination of Japanese soft power resources. Before the Internet was so widely used, commerce was the only form of distribution. However, the Internet provides a new channel for this purpose. The characteristics of the Internet, especially no centrality, make Internet users sovereigns in the Internet sphere, regardless of national boundaries, domestic law, or geographical condition. In addition, the popularity of the P2P networks emphasize and boost the features of the Internet as in the case of BitTorrent. From this perspective, despite the limitations of analysis with regard to porn-related materials, the P2P networks in particular or the Internet in general can be seen as a medium that disseminates the Japanese soft power resources.

In conclusion, this article provides the theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between the Internet—P2P networks and in particular BitTorrent—and soft power resources, and, in particular, the soft power resources of Japan. A function of this relationship is for the potential dissemination of soft power resources by the Internet. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the dissemination of soft power resources does not neces-

sarily mean that the resources have transformed into soft power because the emergence of soft power depends upon contextual conditions.

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