

Synopsis: The Internet and the Japanese Conception of Privacy.

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Consisting of a high population density, the Japanese people are forced to live and work in close proximity, making it arguably difficult to maintain a level of privacy. The question arises whether or not privacy exists at all in Japan. The following passage taken from the book, *The Chrysanthemum*, comments on the lack of privacy in Japanese culture.

Because there is little privacy in a Japanese community, too, it is no surprise that ‘the world’ knows practically everything he does and can reject him if it disapproves. Even the construction of the Japanese house – the thin walls that permit the passage of sound and which are pushed open during the day – makes life extremely public for those who cannot afford a wall and garden.
(Benedict 1946, p. 228)

Two types of privacy are descriptive and normative privacy. The above passage fails to distinguish between these two types. Descriptive privacy is the absence of privacy as a matter of fact . Normative privacy is the lack of privacy, or the right to be unobserved. Understanding a culture’s concept of privacy requires an understanding of the culture itself.

There is no native Japanese word for privacy. The word is borrowed from English and is pronounced “pruaibashii”. The lack of a word may bring some people to the conclusion to the lack of a thing. This is an oversimplified conclusion. Not all concepts can be explained using a single word. The lack of a single word describing a polygon with 2155 sides does not mean a polygon with 2155 sides cannot exist. Rather than describing a noun as “private” or “public” using an adjective, the Japanese language uses compounds to describe the noun. This method doesn’t require a separate word as in English. The existence of other words can also imply a concept. The Japanese language

does have a word for “secret”. A secret is information that is kept “private” from certain parties or individuals.

The historical background of the country gives some insight about the Japanese conception of privacy. Early Japanese culture was influenced greatly by Buddhism. The Buddhist ideal is effacement of one’s self, greatly effecting the concept of privacy. Modern Japan was shaped a drastic change in the social hierarchy in the 1860’s. The significance of this change in relation to the country’s concept of privacy was that it was not underprivileged seeking equality but by the privileged class itself. This suggest that the Japanese culture lacks an autonomous individual. Instead, a sense of the individual as a fluid category is given with the use of situation or context. For example, the Japanese Language contains three first-person pronouns used by men: *watashi*, *boku*, and *ore*. The use of these word depends on the context of conversation and whom the speaker is speaking to, rather than the identity of the speaker. Another form of language used in the Japanese Language is the use of honorifics, or *keigo*, which construct the self appropriate for the situation.

In Japan, an individual belongs to a group such as a business or a neighborhood. When a group acts together, it is rare that an individual will act separately from the group. In this case, it is normal that the individual has a conflict between acting as a part of one group or another. The concept of an individual’s “private time” is lacking. This level of interdependence may seem extreme. There are two Japanese concepts however that harmonize this interdependence. “*Amae*”, an attitude of indulgence and unconditional expectance and “*enryo*”, restraint. These concepts are practiced as such: in

holding a private conversation, the conversation may be overheard. In this case, one can *amae* (presume indulgence) that anyone overhearing the conversation will *enryo*, or restrain, from repeating what was overheard. One acts “as if” the conversation was not overheard. These concepts replace the American conception of an autonomous individual.

There exist a minimal concept of privacy, which Japan and the US both share, and the more elaborated rich conception. The sense of privacy can be conceptualized as situations of restricted access to information, locations, or objects. This concept provides a minimal account of privacy. The Japanese language contains words that suggest this minimal account. These words designate locations as forbidden and information as secret. This suggests that the conception of privacy is firmly rooted in Japanese culture. The rich conception of privacy is an elaborate set of customs unique to a culture. These customs dictate what is considered private. An example of the difference in customs between cultures is how one introduces themselves. In Japan, one bows and keeps their hand at their sides and keep some distance, while in the US one would normally shake hands. Conversely, in Japan one might shove into a crowded subway car, while in the US one may feel uncomfortable making contact with strangers. The Japanese have ritualized methods for exchanging information. Anne Allison describes:

When a group of men from the same company come into a hostess club, the highest ranking among them is likely to set the tone with “*Bureiko shimashoka?*” (Shall we *bureiko*?) *Bureiko* means a breaking of regimen, courtesy, and demeanor - a release from status and tensions. When status is suspended, the employees are allowed to tell their bosses what they think of them, and the bosses are expected to “forget” everything once back at work. In similar vein, the employee may be asked for personal or business advice by their supervisors. The relationships, in short, are pseudo-egalitarian. And through such relationships, business is sustained in Japan. (Allison 1994, p 35)

The fundamental difference between the Japanese and American conventions of privacy is the Japanese emphasis on group loyalty and the American emphasis on the individual. Dean Barnlund writes:

[In America the] individual is the measure of all things. Identity must be claimed and defended by each person for himself. Integrity - the sense of inner harmony and wholeness - resides within the ego of each separate member of society. To preserve identity, the individual must often stand apart or even stand against other members of his family, office, neighborhood, nation. [Whereas in Japan it] is the group that becomes the measure of all things; its identity must be asserted and defended above all. A sense of dignity and security against the hazards of life come from its strength, not from the strength of autonomous individuals. To sustain its inner harmony and wholeness, people respect the needs of the group over selfish needs. Even integrity is a property of the group rather than the property of an individual. (Barnlund 1975, p.154)

The Internet creates new situations for which ethical policies haven't been created, making privacy an issue. One case using the the Japanese conception of privacy can be considered: The manager of a computer server has access to all email sent through the server. The privacy of the person sending the email may be breached, but the manager acts "as if" they don't have any of the information contained in the email. The Internet raises two normative problems, the extension problem and the the coordination problem. The extension problem arises because a culture's customs have to be changed to accommodate these new situations. This is sometimes easily attained as in the computer server example. The coordination problem arises because different cultures have different customs regarding privacy. The entire world has access to the internet, but what may be considered private in one culture may not be in another. The Internet would benefit from a common set of rules defining what is considered private.