

Chapter 1 Japanese Pirates in an “ Information Society ” : From 2channeru to Nikoniko Doga

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Japanese Pirates in an “Information Society”: From *2channeru* to *Nikoniko Dōga*

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1. Introduction

The aim of my paper is to clarify two points by analyzing Japanese pirates in an “information society”: one important not only for contemporary Japanese society but also for global society, and one regarding Japanese media theory. Japanese pirates’ relationship with Japanese information society both suggests a method for thinking about piracy around the world as well as the uniqueness of the latter.

First, I should define “Japanese pirates.” Piracy has, of course, been prohibited in Japan since the notion of copyright was introduced into the country at the beginning of Meiji era, almost 140 years ago. However, Japanese pirates tend to exploit the notion of copyright in this age. In other words, all online users in Japan are pirates in a sense, and are not only pirating music and the like but also the notion of piracy itself.

For example, on *2channeru* 2ちゃんねる (2channel), which is the largest *keijiban*, a type of internet bulletin board system (BBS), numerous illegal extracts from newspapers, magazines, and books can be found. On *Nikoniko Dōga* ニコニコ動画 (Niconico Video / Smiley Smiley Video), a video site like YouTube, a large number of illegal TV and music video clips spanning from the beginning of 20th century to this morning can be found. I called people who engaged such piratical acts—the users of *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga*—Japanese pirates.

Next, I should define “information society.” In global history, pirates appeared in four stages. First, as Professor Inaga argues, “Since the so-called Era of Great Expedition, the surface of the Earth was segmented in accordance with the hegemony of the Portugal and Spain, and then the Dutch and the British. After the Tordesillas Treaty, worldwide piracy was the main moving force heralding the Western domination of the world.”¹

Second, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the “commercial triangular transactions between the East, the West, and Africa also heavily depended on illegal trade. Historical realities are still hidden under official statistical documents.”

Third, during the age of imperialism of the 19th and 20th centuries, even though overt piratical acts were decreasing, as Professor Inaga states, “[I]nternational law itself was made to address maritime hegemonic conflicts among Western nations, and the notion of the ‘high seas’ was related to the legal codification of property and copyright.”

Finally, fourth, there are Japanese pirates, who play an active role in the information society which we live in: “Now we live in a revolutionary era of information technology and commodity distribution. Hacking in cyberspace and hedge funds in the trade market destabilize

¹ This and the below quotations are from the symposium prospectus contained in this volume.

the world-wide social system and call for a drastic rethinking of notions of justice and fair-use. Accusation of rights infringement by the established regime and authorities are challenged by the opposing legal claims of those engaged in piracy, which are made within and outside of the parliamentary system. It is obvious that the regulations of current laws are no longer capable of staying up to date with the latest nano-, bio-, and digital innovations. This also reveals the incapability of contemporary Western ethics and moral codes to deal with globalization. The established world order is collapsing. A new model to cope with the forbidden dependency on its surface and the hidden disorder beneath it should be searched for in the realm outside the law, in the ‘survival art of piracy.’”

So the topic of this paper is clear. In order to reconsider the mechanism by which piracy is carried out in information society, we should analyze past and future ages. Furthermore, Japanese pirates will clarify the scope and the efficacy of Japanese media theory. This is why I have chosen to analyze Japanese pirates in information society.

2. The Terms “*2channel*” and “*nikoniko*”

I have used the *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga* in Japanese because they are extremely difficult to translate into English. As a matter of fact, they have not been translated into English.

2channeru, as I have mentioned, is the largest internet *keijiban* and contains numerous illegal extracts from newspapers, magazines, and books. While there are similar internet social media websites like Facebook and Twitter, where people exchange information, opinions, and so on, unlike these services, *2channeru* is based on the principal of completely unrestricted anonymous posting; it places no limits on piracy. Users of *2channeru* are free to post their own information and opinions without having to go through any authentication process overseen by officials or operators. Users have the free right to post any content, which includes other illegal extracts from other media.

“2” basically means second or sub-genre. However, *2channel* is also a reference to the radio frequency modulator number commonly used for connecting earlier-generation game consoles to television sets. This is a reference to pirating traditional mainstream media (like NHK / Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai or “Japan Broadcasting Corporation”), which dominate other radio frequency modulator numbers.

A similar logic can be found in the case of *Nikoniko Dōga*. I earlier stated that it is the Japanese version of YouTube because it began by pirating YouTube content. The largest difference between it and other video sharing sites like YouTube is the presence of comments appearing directly in videos, not below them. This architecture allows users to communicate as the video is played. It feels like one is writing on other users’ videos.

Just like *2channeru*, *Nikoniko Dōga* does not have an official English translation. *nikoniko* means smiley, and “*dōga*” means video. This aims to make fun of serious video, movie or TV companies. *nikoniko* is often used in Japanese in a non-serious way.

In this way, it is important to analyze terms related to Japanese pirates in “information society” that are hard to translate into English. This provides us with an important point of view for understanding a problematic concerning translation and cultural difference between Japan

and rest of the world.

3. Media Theory Beyond the Boundaries of the Nation

Even though *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga* are the most visited sites in Japan, they are quite unknown by the rest of the world. It is not easy to define these two forms of Japanese piracy, perhaps even for the many famous scholars in Japanese Studies that are in attendance today.

2channeru and *Nikoniko Dōga* users are Japanese pirates that do not respect the rules of ordinary media, and their names include “2” and “nikoniko,” which are pregnant with meaning. However since 2000 until now they have remained as sites for Japanese pirates.

Ever since these two sites appeared in information society after a storm of new information technologies (Windows 95, iMac, iPhone, iPad, etc.), various media theories were proposed in Japan. These media theories were concerned with how authorities could restrict the behavior of new media and protect the rules and the boundaries of the nation. Japanese information society was facing a turning point. This turning point was caused by the end of Japanese ethics and moral codes relating to old media forms. The established Japanese order is collapsing.

When *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga* appeared in 2000, the terms “2” and “nikoniko” became more fun in Japanese society. They were purely roguish, because Japanese information society was facing a turning point.

At this time, people fell into two generations: “old” and “digital natives.” Digital natives grew up with the development of new media like *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga*, and thus do not feel that the piracy is illegal. They could not understand that users of *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga* were pirating traditional media.

I find the lack of the Japanese media theorists who consider the emergence of *2channeru* and *Nikoniko Dōga* unfortunate. Japanese media theory is mainly discussed in the context of stopping piracy and protecting copyright. However the Japanese piracy websites built by digital natives need to be explained; they are hard to capture using ordinary media theory and existed far outside ordinary copyright law.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I stated that analyzing Japanese pirates in an information society can show us one way to understand contemporary Japanese society and also global society, as well as a way to consider Japanese media theory.

After the collapse of Japan’s overheated stock and real estate markets that followed the country’s rapid economic growth, Japanese society found itself in a “lost decade.” Even now, Japan seems to remain in an economic depression. Furthermore, it is a rapidly aging society. We live in a society divided between older people who cannot understand Japanese pirates, and a younger generation that are digital natives who grow up with such piracy.

At this current turning point of Japan’s information society, it is quite essential that we reconsider these Japanese pirates. We should develop our understandings of “2” and “nikoniko” in order to theoretically restore and re-build the relationship between order and disorder in

information society.

Consequently, it is time that we examine the logic of and the reason for the rapid growth of Japanese pirates. It is also necessary to grasp Japanese information society's media theory and to come up with ideas for the country's globalized rapidly ageing society in order to make a place for cooperating within the art of survival that is piracy.

We need to address the aforementioned inadequacies in Japanese Media theory. In the context of information society we should think about our attitude towards piracy by considering Japanese pirates, and, in doing so, grasp the uniqueness of the Japanese media theory.