Information Leaks & Age of Personal Media

By Isao ADACHI

"A specter is haunting the world – the specter of WikiLeaks." Did the uncontrollable Internet become a new enemy, following Communism and al-Qaida, of the US government whose diplomatic cables amounting to as many as 250,000 were leaked on the Net? The Manifesto of the Communist Party, which begins with the specter metaphor, goes on to say, "All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter." If we transposed "Europe" in the beginning of the original manifesto to "the world," then it would pretty much show the situation in which national governments find themselves today. In Japan, which proved to be no exception, the protected video footage showing a Chinese fishing boat ramming into a Japan Coast

A scene from the controversial video clip claimed to show a Chinese fishing boat approaching a Japan Coast Guard vessel right before their collision in waters off the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (from YouTube).

Guard patrol boat off the disputed islands of Senkaku was leaked out and posted on YouTube, making it evident that anything can happen on the Internet, beyond the control of the government, causing diplomatic and political predicaments. How do we set about managing digital information? Or, should it really be a matter of our utmost concern?

A young private first class who served in Iraq is regarded as the source of the leak of US diplomatic cables. The video clips of the collision of the Chinese fishing boat were leaked by a Japan Coast Guard officer. As one would expect, the US State Department and the Japan Coast Guard do have systems of information management. Every and each organization has an elaborate set of rules to prevent information leaks, including various levels of clearance to access information, passwords, and prohibition of Internet access through intranet systems. Despite all that, information leaks out. It looks as if being leaked is an inherent attribute of information.

Graham Greene, who once worked for Britain's secret service, quoted Joseph Conrad in the spy novel *"The Human Factor"* as saying, "I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered into his soul." First, seeing recent leaks from Greene's perspective, computers have obtained "ties" such as the Internet and intranets. Second, networks essentially seek ties with people as they are built to do just that. If Conrad were right, this would constitute a factor of corruption.

There is another person I need to talk about. It is Alan Kay who worked for the Palo Alto Research Center of Xerox Corp. in the 1970s and later introduced the concept of "personal computer"

that has since changed the world. Kay published a number of thought-provoking reports, albeit figurative and extremely difficult to understand. Kay, who considers the PC as a medium, wrote in *"Computer Software"* authored in 1984, "It is not a tool. It is the first metamedium, and as such it has degrees of freedom for representation and expression never before encountered and as yet barely investigated." In his 1977 report *"Microelectronics and the Personal Computer,"* Kay wrote, "The interaction of society and a new medium of communication and self-expression can be disturbing." He concluded the report by striking a somewhat prophetic note: "Although the personal computer can be guided in any direction we choose, the real sin would be to make it act like a machine!"

He probably meant to say that machines may be a slave to rules and manuals, but media are not. Today's problem, it seems to me, probably stemmed from the fact that governments and administrative organizations tried to make computers and networks act like machines as they built and managed them. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, when asked why he continues leaking classified information, replied that he would like to help people see the world as it really is. Judging it right or wrong aside, the prospect of people capable of seeing the world as it is should be an intriguing idea for everyone. The prospect is brought to us by PCs and networks as personal media. What kind of world is there for us to see? It is a matter we need to concern by ourselves first.　　　**JS**

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