

Pop Culture and Digital Policy

Ichiya Nakamura

RIETI / Stanford Japan Center

1. Meaning of Pop Culture

Japanese pop culture such as comics, animation and video game is now drawing global interest. J-pop music and TV dramas are also popular in Asia. The conventional image of Japan was of a military state before the end of WWII and an industrial state after the war. However, since the 1990s its cultural presentation has been changing. Further, there is now a suggestion of a “cool” country in today’s image of Japan.

This change results in expectations for the growth of pop culture-related industries. However, the share of the contents market in the Japanese GDP is smaller than the global average, and the percentage of foreign sales in the entire Japanese contents sales is also small. Additionally, the Japanese entertainment industry has been shrinking over the last few years. Hollywood’s full scale efforts towards the contents business and the speed of growth of Korea’s game and animation industries, backed up by governmental policy, are also threatening Japan.

On the other hand, the expressive method of pop culture can be applied to remote interactive non-entertainment fields, such as e-commerce and online education, which have seen promising growth. This expressive method also influences the plans and designs of products, such as robots and cars. We should also think about the effect on foreign policy and security treaties in this trend of focusing on “soft” power.

2. Industrial Characteristics and Digital Technology

Comics, animations, and games have flourished in Japanese culture based on western technologies that were imported after Japan’s modernization. These fields are growing ever bigger through significant diversification and subdivision, yet at the same time they can be seen as merging into a single industry, helped by digital media mixing techniques.

Within the business structure of this industry, basic business units comprise numerous creators, who run their business in a venture-like manner, and a few producers assigned from oligopolistic companies that hold most of the circulating capital. Although the downsizing of creation tools allows more amateurs to join in the media creation industry, the industry as a whole faces several serious problems, such as the rigid structure of media distribution and an insufficiency of

producers who can operate projects internationally.

The problems deriving from digitalization, such as the illegal copying of music, are becoming serious. Growing development costs driven by Hollywood-typed big business is also seen as critical.

However, digital technology has bred new expressive styles, such as interactive media, CGs, and 3D graphics. These digital technologies have also opened up new business fields, such as the World Wide Web on home computers, Internet access, ring tones, and photo mail on mobile phones.

In particular, it is remarkable that young Japanese are now establishing a new form of informational behavior that could be termed “P2P-style interactive networking,” through building up mobile communication methods or bidirectional communication sites like “2ch.net.”

3. New political approach

Contents policy influences a variety of social aspects, but only industrial and traditional-artistic promotion has been focused on. As a more effective and long term policy, the main point should be shifted

- from entertainment to non-entertainment / individual communication
- from traditional art to pop culture

The Japanese expressive method has been continuously cultivated by society since before Japan’s modernization, within a cultural background where everybody enjoys “pop” items regardless of their age or sex. The characteristics of this Japanese pop market include the following points: children’s purchasing power is strong; participation of adults in the market is large; “*otaku*,” who are the obsessive “maniac” comic/animation fans, contributes significantly to market activities; and the fact that there is less regulation of sexual and violent expression in the media.

Although these characteristics form the strength of Japan, these aspects also make the government hesitate to promote pop culture and make other countries share the situation. Global and digital policy that is compatible with maintaining and promoting cultural diversity should be developed.

However, total contents policy has never been established in Japan. It ranges from industrial and artistic promotion, copyrights, computerization of various fields (such as e-government and online education), scientific and technological policy, social and moral regulations, foreign affairs, and even security treaties. The current status of such policies is not clearly organized.

RIETI keeps discussion on this issue through a research project on the pop culture policy named “Project-P”.