

SKorean court ends law requiring real names online

August 23 2012, by YOUKYUNG LEE

(AP)—A South Korean court ended a law requiring Internet contributors to use their real names to leave comments, ruling unanimously Thursday that the policy undermined free speech.

The online naming law took effect in 2007 under a bipartisan push to curb libeling, the spread of false rumors and abusive comments in the cyber space. South Korea saw a flurry of celebrity suicides allegedly motivated by malicious online comments, which mobilized the move to control the Internet space.

The eight judges at the Constitutional Court said the real name policy discouraged people from voicing dissents out of concern they would be punished.

"Expressions under anonymity or pseudonym allow (people) to voice criticism on majority opinion without giving into external pressure," the court said. "Even if there is a side effect to online anonymity, it should be strongly protected for its constitutional value."

The court also said it found no proof that the law helped decrease libel or the spread of rumors and false information.

Under the real-name policy, nearly 150 websites with over 100,000 daily visitors, often very popular destinations for South Koreans, required submission of identity information to leave comments.

The regulation also prompted South Koreans, including popular online pundits and critics of government policies, to find an anonymous refuge in overseas services such as Google and Twitter. Some argued the law discriminated against domestic Internet services.

Observers said a series of security breach that leaked millions of personal data from those websites that adopted real-name policy also factored in the decision.

Others said the ruling, while it is a significant step toward fostering freedom of speech, addresses a small part of broader regulations that are still tightly controlling the Internet space in one of the world's most wired countries.

Even though South Korea has a vibrant democracy and Asia's fourth-largest economy, a batch of laws that regulate the Internet are still in place, critics say.

"Real name policies are still intact in many other places. Teens and their parents should verify their names to play online games and during election campaign periods, no anonymous comments are allowed," at websites of media companies, said Jinbo Net activist Chang Yeo-kyung.

Until recently, South Koreans could be criminally punished for leaving false information online. Before 2012, South Koreans were not allowed to disclose in the cyber space their support or opposition of a political party or a candidate. These bills were ruled unconstitutional in 2010 and in 2011.

Follow Youkyung Lee on Twitter at twitter.com/YKLeeAP

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Citation: SKorean court ends law requiring real names online (2012, August 23) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-skorean-court-law-requiring-real.html>

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