

SOUTH KOREA: ACTIVISM WITH NEW MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL ERA

FINAL PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the digital age, new media technologies have played a paramount role in transforming the way collective action looks and operates. More specifically, the role new media technologies plays in activism can be best observed in the case of South Korea.

As South Korea continues to shift away from an authoritarian regime to become an increasingly more democratic nation, it is experiencing massive political, cultural, economic and social changes. As the country undergoes these various changes, its people are utilizing new media technologies to advocate for change through a new form of activism – digital activism.

Not only have new media technologies changed the way activism looks and operates in Korean society, but have also played a crucial role in expediting the country's transition. Over the last half century, protests have played a crucial role in shaping South Korea. It was only in the last quarter century that digital media began to play a vital role in establishing a new identity for South Korea as new media technologies helped organize and mobilize movements to advocate for change.

By reviewing key case studies pulled from the last 10 years of digital activism in South Korea and referencing readings from the course, this paper will aim to grasp a better understanding of how South Koreans utilize new media technologies to inspire, organize and mobilize people; to influence political processes, systems, and decisions; and to challenge traditional power relations between the 'elites' and 'ordinary people within the broader cultural, social and political context of South Korea.

NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES IN SOUTH KOREA

Having made an incredulous comeback from being one of the world's poorest countries in the 1950s to being one of the world's most prosperous by the 2000s, South Korea is often referred to as a developmental success story due to the unprecedented development it has achieved within the last half century. This, in turn, brought about widespread urbanization, completely changing the face of Korea from

a country of low-lying shabby shacks to a nation sprawling with impressive, sturdy skyscrapers. With this period of concentrated hyper-development came the rise of a state-of-the-art IT infrastructure.

South Korea is widely recognized for its technological advancement, especially in the area of Internet infrastructure and the usage of social media. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) ranked South Korea the nation with the best communications infrastructure (Fitzpatrick, 2015) and ranked the country first place in the Global ICT Development Index (GIDI). The ITU ranking South Korea first in the GIDI means South Korea is ranked the highest in overall ICT readiness – reflecting the level of networked infrastructure and access to ICTs; ICT intensity – reflecting the level of use of ICTs in the society; and ICT impact – reflecting the results/ outcomes of more efficient and effective ICT use (ICT Data and Statistics Division within the Telecommunication Development Bureau, 2015).

Not only is Internet widely available and accessible, South Korea is also considered by many to be home to the fastest Internet connections in the world. *Business Insider* ranked South Korea as the country with the fastest Internet speeds, with an average Mbps speed of 22.2 (Speiser, 2015). Internet speeds have increased 1.6% over the last year.

Despite already having the world's fastest internet, South Korea's SK Telecom is currently working on getting a fifth-generation mobile network, 5G to replace the current 4G LTE. South Korea's SK Telecom reportedly demonstrated 5G speeds of up to 19.1 gigabits per second (nearly 1,000 times faster than the 25 megabits-per-second offered by the 4G LTE) would allow users to download a 2GB movie in fractions of a second (Boom, 2015).

South Koreans are also major consumers of information and communications technology (ICT). South Korea has the highest Internet penetration rate at 92.3% (ICT Data and Statistics Division within the Telecommunication Development Bureau, 2015). For comparison, the United States has an Internet penetration rate of 87.4%. Additionally, the average South Korean smartphone user's monthly data usage is

271 MB. For comparison, the average global smartphone user's monthly data usage is 85 MB.

It is important to note South Korea's advanced ICT because it implies that high internet speeds, connectivity and usage is responsible for certain trends in its digital activism. As the most connected country, with the fastest Internet, well-developed IT infrastructure and arguably the most active pool of Netizens in the world, digital grassroots campaigns are easier to organize and mobilize (Scholz, 2010) than they would be in other parts of the world. The high number of frequent active users increases the likeliness of content spreading quickly and widely, making it easier for movements to gain momentum and go viral. Trends have a high turnover rate. News travels fast in South Korea, and media platforms on the web, social media platforms, and blogs and forums on Naver may be one of the fastest ways to spread awareness. Some of the results of the following campaigns may seem unbelievable, but it is important to keep in mind that South Korea has a top-ranking IT infrastructure and its culture also makes it easy to perpetuate trending news. While viral campaigns may be difficult to achieve in other countries, facilitated by the development of advanced ICT, viral campaigns are common in South Korea.

It is important to keep this in mind as we review the following case studies as South Koreans take advantage of its world-class IT infrastructure to regularly use the Internet and social network systems (SNSs) to engage in politics, and accomplish advocacy goals midst radically shifting social and cultural dynamics.

SEWOL TRAGEDY

The Sewol Ferry tragedy occurred on the morning of Wednesday, April 16, 2014, en route from Incheon to Jeju. A total of 476 passengers, including 325 secondary school students of Daewon High School on a field trip, were aboard the 6,825-ton ferry when it capsized. In all, 304 passengers and crew members died in the disaster, 250 of the dead being high school students (New York Times, 2015).

In light of the Sewol Ferry tragedy, an online movement called the Yellow Ribbon campaign was launched by a local student club called ATL on Saturday, April 19,

2014. It is important to note that the Yellow Ribbon campaign began in response to a negative incident that represents a larger problem within South Korean society – corruption across authority structures and the political system. The Sewol Ferry tragedy highlighted all the problems with the government and people in positions of power as negligence and corruption were identified as reasons for the ferry accident. This supports Tarrow’s theory that collective action occurs when society views itself as disoriented and mobilization results from the urge to recompose it (Tarrow, 2003).



The Yellow Ribbon campaign circulated a yellow ribbon across social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Naver and Kakao to draw awareness to the accident and raise funds for families stricken by the tragedy. The use of one central consistent symbol unified everyone under one idea and helped consolidate a single group identity. Many partook in the campaign, changing their profile pictures or posting content with the

image of a yellow ribbon and condolences.

Other variations of the yellow ribbon image also began to circulate on popular social media sites, with many posting original content with condolences and grievances. Participation in the movement through the sharing of content played a role in building upon connective action and reinforcing collective action.

Although there was cohesion in visuals and messaging, people could also add personal touch by posting slight variations of the yellow ribbon and writing personal condolences as Instagram captions or Facebook statuses. The added component of freedom of self-expression added to the success of the campaign because personal and expressive content that could be shared, recognized and repeated through network sharing activities increases the likelihood of self-motivated participation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). More people became inclined to share,

perpetuating participation, coordinating and scaling the campaign and leading to an increased likelihood of going viral.

Also noteworthy is the fact that many of the original content was contributed by Korean celebrities. Celebrity endorsements solicit public support (Tatarchevskiy, 2011) and leveraging celebrity participation greatly helped spread the word, as each celebrity had immense influence, large follower base, and vast reach.

Popular A-list celebrities that posted about the Sewol Tragedy, using the yellow ribbon of the campaign, include:

1. **Lee Min-ho:** Won multiple Baeksang Arts Awards, an awards ceremony considered the "South Korean Golden Globe Award";
2. **Park Shin-hye:** Ranked among Forbes "Korea 40 most powerful celebrities" in 2015 for high earnings, media exposure and talent;
3. **Kwon Ji-yong:** Also known as, G-Dragon from famous boyband, BIG BANG;
4. **Kim Jae-joong:** Member of famous boyband group, TVXQ whose fanbase landed in the 2008 Guinness World Record Book for having the BIGGEST fanclub (Casseopia) in the world; current JYJ member;
5. **Uhm Jung-hwa:** Considered to be one of the most influential and evergreen women in the Korean entertainment industry; and
6. **Honey Lee:** Placed 4th place in Miss Universe 2007.

The posts were paired with the hashtag, #prayforsouthkorea. Having one symbolic visual and hashtag to represent the campaign helped consolidate a group identity for the campaign (Suh, 2014).

In addition to the online campaign, the student club gathered about 50 people to hand out yellow ribbons at various places around Seoul, including Seoul City Hall and Sinchon Station.

The National Disaster Relief Association also joined the Yellow Ribbon campaign and launched a webpage on Naver - a popular Web search portal with added features like forums and blogs, allowing users to leave messages and make donations to families.

The Yellow Ribbon campaign was highly successful and achieved its goal to foster support and raise funds for the families who are suffering from the sunken ferry. Although an exact number could not be determined due to anonymous donations, there were many public donations by celebrities, including Park Shin-hye's fifty million won (\$50,000) donation; Korean actors Cha Seung-won and Song Seung-hun, and actress Ha Ji-won donated one hundred million won (\$100,000; and sports stars, Olympic figure skating golden medalist Queen Yuna and LA Dodgers player Ryu Hyun Jin each donated one hundred million won (\$100,000) to support the victims.

Through the Yellow Ribbon campaign, use of new media technologies, ALT was able to inspire, organize and mobilize the South Korean people to empathize with the grieving parents and help support them financially.

@PARKKNIFE VS. CONSERVATIVE NEWSPAPERS

Choi and Park studied how netizens in South Korea used social media to organize and mobilize people towards one political goal: eliminating a conservative national daily newspaper (2014).

It is important to note that what motivated @parkknife to launch a movement against the conservative national newspaper was his disagreement and displeasure with a larger problem within South Korean society – a biased news source in an allegedly fair and democratic nation. In alignment with Tarrow's theory that collective action occurs when society views itself as disoriented and mobilization results from the urge to recompose it (Tarrow, 2003), @parkknife's reasoning for starting a campaign against the national newspaper was rooted in a foundational grassroots digital advocacy theory.

A community was organized on Twitter by one individual user, @parkknife. Although mobilization and communication for movements on social media are primarily propelled by the self-motivated sharing of ideas, plans, images, and resources, leadership plays a cornerstone role in steering the movement (Poell, 2015). For instance, it was not only the participation by multiple parties in the larger common

conversation, but @parkknife's role as the group organizer, information provider and coordinator contributed to the sustainability of the group.

Additionally, to broaden the support base, @parkknife and his colleagues created an online community called, *Chopae*, with over 700 members joining voluntarily in half a year. In this way, as Kavada noted in the case of the Occupy movement, *Chopae* activists identified themselves as a collective actor through the use of social media (Kavada, 2015). Group members formed a collective identity through the framing process of discourse. This reinforces Wright's theory that political talk in formally non-political forums such as, the vocalization of dissatisfaction with biased national daily newspaper supporting conservative parties on Twitter, is crucial for improving overall democratic health as it helps "citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy" (2012).

The online community also demonstrated a new form of collective activism through the mediation of technology in everyday life. Massive "retweeting" further enhanced group solidarity and broadened the base of support. Among several technology-mediated activities, the act of retweeting seemed to play an important role in consolidating identity and making a symbolic expression as a political act. Retweeting has combined characteristics of broadcast and interpersonal interaction, and functions like an electronic word-of-mouth channel (Jansen et al., 2009).

Finally, rather than decaying to an echo chamber in the form of "slacktivism," online activism translated into real life, and involvement became crystallized through offline actions. For instance, offline gatherings, group meetings or workshops were held on a monthly basis. Leaflets, stickers, and cellular phone accessories were produced to promote the closure of the conservative newspaper. Public figures with Twitter accounts were invited to lectures and interviews. Nationwide events were held to publicize *Chopae's* argument. In agreement with Graham, open dialogue about political issues on non-political online forums is important because the conversation could transfer into civic life and inspire offline action (Graham, 2015; Wright, 2012).

@parkknife was able to utilize new media technologies to organize an online community in support of a democratic nation through democratic means, and cause a disruption across cultural, social, and political fabrics of South Korea.

KOREAN AIR #NUTGATE

The Korean Air “Nutgate” incident refers to the time when Heather Cho, the daughter of the CEO of Korean Air, sitting in first class, forced cabin manager Park Chang-Jin and a female attendant to kneel in front of her for serving Cho macadamia nuts the wrong way - in a bag and not in a glass bowl. Cho also called Park names, pushed him into the cockpit door and jabbed him with a service manual. Cho then forced the taxiing plane to return to the gate so that the chief flight attendant could be kicked off. As a result, the flight was slightly delayed and all passengers aboard the plane as well as those aboard other planes were jeopardized.

When news of the incident broke on Twitter, it made for “a truly remarkable tale of arrogance and entitlement, the story of one first-class passenger with powerful connections inconveniencing more than 200 others over a bag of nuts” (Taylor, 2014).

As mentioned in the two case studies prior, it is important to note that the Nutgate movement was a direct response to a negative incident that represents a larger problem within South Korean society. This supports Tarrow’s theory that collective action occurs when society views itself as disoriented and mobilization results from the urge to recompose it (Tarrow, 2003). The reason the incident was able to be branded as with the hashtag, #nutgate on social media, and the reason it stirred so much discussion, is because it represented society’s resentment towards the elite families who run South Korea's powerful business conglomerates known as *chaebol*.

Bloggers turned to Naver and Daum cafes, forum boards, and blogs to criticize Cho for her arrogance, and took to social media to mock her for going “nuts”. Aligning under a common set of values, the South Korean community unanimously supported the #nutgate movement.

The hashtag, #nutgate went viral. Pressure from the posts by angry South Korean netizens led to Cho's resignation as Vice President of Korean Air.

With so much public dissent about the issue across social media, the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, an influential South Korean pressure group, filed a complaint against Cho. As a result, the South Korean Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport announced that it was summoning Cho for questioning over the incident and required her to face criminal charges.

Ultimately, through the #Nutgate movement, South Korean citizens were able to utilize new media technologies to challenge traditional power relations between the 'elites' and 'ordinary' people, and influence political processes, systems, and decisions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, each of the case studies help grasp a better understanding of how South Koreans utilize new media technologies to inspire, organize and mobilize people; to influence political processes, systems, and decisions; and to challenge traditional power relations between the 'elites' and 'ordinary' people within the broader cultural, social and political context of South Korea.

New media technologies are definitely major tools utilized by South Korean society in the midst of its radically shifting cultural, social, and political dynamics. However, new media technologies are not only tools, they are also a foundational component of the actual change. New media technologies aid in propelling society forward, but they are also responsible for establishing it as a more open and free nation as digitization secures democratization. New media technologies are not only the means to an end, but the end itself.

Nations are always changing as history continues to write itself. However, throughout history, there are times when there is great change and there are times when there is little change. Presently, South Korea is experiencing a time of great change. New media technologies are assisting, catalyzing and accelerating the transformative process during South Korea's tumultuous time of changing dynamics. Once the

country passes through this intensely evolutionary time and stabilizes, it will be interesting to see how digital activism will have aided in sculpting and been responsible for solidifying South Korea's new identity.

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