New Technology, Old Habits: The Decline of the Internet as a Democratic Tool in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how the Internet has lost its power as a tool for political participation in South Korea, one of the world’s most wired countries. Its 2002 presidential election was praised as one of the most spectacular examples of social change caused by the Internet. The following election in 2007, however, marked the total inability of the Internet to mobilize voters. How did the Internet, which is often claimed to have a democratizing potential, lose its power so quickly? By comparing the two elections, this paper shows why the effects of the Internet cannot be generalized. Although many scholars believe that cyberspace is anonymous and difficult to regulate, the Korean Internet is drastically different. This paper explores how the Internet evolves into many “internets” under the influence of a country’s unique sociocultural factors.

Keywords: Anonymity, Censorship, Internet, Korea, Participation, Political Participation, Social Practice, Webocracy

INTRODUCTION: THE INTERNET AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

The Internet is a difficult topic. Not only is it a moving target that transforms itself constantly, it is also an amorphous, multifarious mass with no definite shape that is referred to using a singular noun. This is not only because the name “Internet” is used as an umbrella term encompassing different media forms but also because the technology has evolved into something quite different from the original form. We say we use the Internet. However, we are actually using specific features constituting it such as web sites, email, newspapers, streaming video, etc. The Internet is far from being a single medium.

The term “the Internet” may have made sense when it was first introduced as a single experimental network in the United States. The Internet has outgrown the relevance of the terminology, however, as it has grown into “a globe-spanning system linking millions of computers” and multimedia where different “digital representations—movies, TV, music, images, and voice” are possible thanks to advanced compression methods (Abbate, 1999, p. 3; Gibson, Berger, Lookabaugh, Lindbergh, & Baker, 1998, p. 1).

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What complicates the study of the Internet even further is its incessant divergence and localization. The Internet as used in the United States is different from that in Japan and Korea, for example, not only in the content but also even in the technology itself. For example, the Internet has been understood by the majority of Japanese as preselected content formatted for tiny cell phone (keitai) screens even before the smart phone was introduced. Unlike Japan, where mobile Internet users have thrown away the wired Internet, Korean smart phone users are still passionate about the PC-based Internet, and many enjoy online games at crowded public places called “PC bangs” or PC rooms.1

This paper explores the multifarious aspects of the Internet within society. An attempt is made to prove that many problems that have easily been attributed to the nature of the Internet actually come from the society surrounding it instead of the technology itself. It basically argues that the Internet has evolved into social formations with unique merits and problems according to the specific context in which the technology is situated. This paper argues that the relationship between the Internet and society evades generalization because the Internet is not a singular entity. In other words, the Internet is not one but many.

Against the media-oriented views that find causal links between Internet technology and social engagement, this paper investigates why the potential of the Internet should be found not in its inherent characteristics but in managing social forces that shape the Internet such as governance, commercialization and ideologies (Weare, 2002, p. 660; Polat, 2005, p. 442). It is an attempt to explore the Internet as social practice by analyzing the forces that have influenced the shaping of the technology. The focus is placed on the transformation of the Internet as a civic participation tool in Korea from early 2002 to 2012. In so doing, the commercialization and government regulations are critically reviewed, analyzing how these practices have influenced the Internet in Korea.

**STRONGER INTERNET, WEAKER PARTICIPATION**

Studies have consistently shown a link between Internet use and political engagement. For example, Tolbert and McNeal (2003), Stanley and Weare (2004), Kenski and Stroud (2006) confirmed the relationship between Internet access and political participation. More recently, Bakker and de Vreese (2011) and Jensen (2013) proved that Internet use is positively related with various forms of political participation. Czernich (2012) even showed the correlation between Internet connection speed and voter participation.

South Korea is regarded as one of the most wired places on earth. Ironically, however, the very forces contributing to the Internet penetration in the country have challenged democratic use of the technology. For instance, Korea’s successful adoption of the Internet has been driven by state-led industrial policies and giant conglomerates. This point is exemplified in the significant reduction in the political influence of the Internet in less than five years. Korea’s 2002 presidential election had been praised as one of the most spectacular examples of social change brought by the Internet as the following New York Times article suggests:

> For years, people will be debating what made this country go from conservative to liberal, from gerontocracy to youth culture and from staunchly pro-American to a deeply ambivalent ally—all seemingly overnight. For most here, the change is symbolized by the election in December of Roh Moo Hyun, a reformist lawyer with a disarmingly unfussy style. [...] But for many observers, the most important agent of change has been the Internet. (French, 2003)

If the Internet was “the most important agent of change” in Korean politics in the early 2000s, the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections marked the Internet’s inability to mobilize voters for the elections “notable for the utter lack
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