MOVEMENT LEGACIES AND ONLINE MOBILISATION: THE KOREAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2002

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about the extent to which the Internet makes a qualitative difference to how politics operates. As part of the author's current doctoral thesis, this paper discusses how pre-existing movement traditions have shaped activists' use of the Internet in South Korea, on the basis of a case study of the Korean presidential election of 2002. Based on triangulated data collected from in-depth interviews, offline observation and virtual ethnography, the paper suggests that the Internet (or the public's idealised perception of it) has offered Korean civil society activists 'an acceptable face' while opposing the ruling class. In earlier periods, such activist networks would have been marginalised from the political sphere by the authoritarian state.

Introduction

The 16th Korean presidential election has been widely regarded as one of the earliest and most successful models of online campaigning. On 19 December 2002, a liberal underdog Roh Moo-hyun[*] won the election in question, defeating his conservative rival Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party (GNP) and the other five candidates. The race was a close contest between Roh and Lee with only 2.3% of the votes separating them. Coming from an unconventional political background, Roh was considered an unlikely presidential candidate from the beginning. The son of a peasant, he never attended college, spent years as a construction worker, and taught himself law at night eventually passing the bar exam. He was better known for his former role as a human rights lawyer than for his brief administrative experience as Maritime Minister. Moreover, the election took place at a time when a nuclear standoff between the US and North Korea was emerging as the key campaign issue. Roh had a conciliatory stance towards the reclusive North while Lee advocated a hard-line policy. Given the extreme anti-communist atmosphere in South Korean society, the electoral result attracted considerable attention in both domestic and international media outlets. It has been argued that Roh could not have defeated well-funded major party candidates without the Internet. Indeed, he has been called “the world’s first Internet president” (Watt, 2003).

During the campaign, members of *Nosamo* (a Korean acronym for “a gathering of people who love Roh Moo-hyun”, an Internet-based voluntary association of Roh’s supporters) aggressively used online bulletin boards and SMS right up to the last minute to urge young people to come out and vote. According to exit polls, Roh was trailing Lee in the morning, but the turnout significantly increased in the early afternoon, mostly due to a large number of young voters, and at around 3 p.m., he moved ahead of his rival and went on to win the election (Han, J., 2007). An immediate reaction of the mass media to Roh’s victory was to put *Nosamo* in the spotlight as the presidential kingmaker, focusing on their extensive use of online fundraising and viral campaigning.

Despite such a dramatic victory, however, the President faced a drastic drop in popularity once sworn in. On 12 March 2004, the National Assembly voted to impeach Roh, 193 votes to 2, for his non-neutral comments regarding the forthcoming parliamentary election. It was the first time in South Korea’s history that a president was impeached. While Roh’s presidency was suspended, the 17th parliamentary election took place on 15 April 2004, where the Uri Party won a majority of seats. The Uri Party

[*] In Korean, surnames precede forenames.

was formed only 6 months prior to this particular election. A number of (ex-)*Nosamo* members were directly involved in its formation as well as in its operation. In fact, the presidential impeachment vote did not include the ballots of 49 members of the pro-Roh Uri Party legislators, who were evicted from the chamber for physically occupying the podium to block the passage of the bill (See also Kihl, 2005: 343-351). Support for Roh was demonstrated not only through the result of this parliamentary election but also through mass candlelight rallies organised and advertised online. On 14 May 2004, the Constitutional Court decided to acquit and reinstate Roh. It is widely believed that public pressure influenced this decision.

One of the most common claims about the political impact of the Internet is that the material properties of the Internet, such as its decentralised structure, a low barrier to entry and the reconfiguration of space and time, have levelled the political playground. However, there have been only a few incidents where the Internet has actually put long-shot candidates in office, which is why Roh described himself as "… the rare president who seized a winning chance on the Internet and parlayed it into a victory in the real world" (in the "Online Dialogue with the Citizens" on 23 March 2006). If his case is as 'rare' as described, a next logical step would be to question what about the Internet worked particularly for him and his supporters while the infrastructure was available to his opponents as well (*'Why Roh?'*).

Furthermore, with the normalisation and routinisation of Internet politics, it is becoming even more difficult for politicians to differentiate themselves from their opponents and to sustain their supporters' online networks. However, the sitting Korean president tided over the impeachment challenge early in his presidency once again thanks to the Internet. His case consequently raises an important question for global comparison. (*'Why in South Korea?'*)

Roh's case also constitutes an important study for Korean society itself. Although Korea is one of the countries most frequently mentioned in discussions of the political impact of online technology, attention has centred on documenting the proliferation of Internet uses in a descriptive (and sometimes even sensationalised) fashion. To be more specific, just after the election, *Nosamo* was portrayed as a 'kingmaker', and after the impeachment charge was passed in 2004, anyone who expressed their support for Roh's reinstatement were labelled as *Nosamo*, which soon became a synonym for Roh's 'militia', by the conservative news media and the opposition parties. Such an anecdotal,

fad-driven approach fails to provide a systematic understanding of the country's enthusiasm for Internet-based political activity. (*'So what does all this mean to the country?'*)

Literature Review

The early literature tends to draw upon the idea that the Internet can serve to equalise competition between major and minor actors in the realm of politics. Writers such as Corrado and Firestone (1996), Pruijt (2002) and Bennett (2003) state that the Internet creates new opportunities for smaller, resource-poor organisations to exercise political influence outside conventional political channels. In the electoral context, well-cited tales include the Internet campaign of Jesse Ventura for the governorship of Minnesota in 1998, which crucially helped him defeat two major-party candidates, and that of Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004. Roh's case is also often used to describe how online technology turns elections in favour of minor candidates.

However, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, this argument has been challenged as the Internet has been integrated into the mainstream political practice. The Internet is hardly a novelty any more, which means it is becoming more and more difficult for candidates to differentiate themselves in e-campaigning from their opponents and to make electoral differences. The Internet might have been a niche for smaller, resource-poor players to benefit from in its early days, but now better-funded established-party candidates have joined the e-campaigning trend and have been able to provide more sophisticated services and advanced distribution channels (Eskenazi, cited in Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Margolis, Resnick and Levy, 2003; Carlson and Strandberg, 2007).

Hence, theories of the growing social normalisation of the Internet are put forward. The Internet's capacity for fundraising and recruitment is overrepresented in news media (while a major political figure like Bill Clinton could raise a similar amount of funding over a dinner reception!), and there have been only a few incidents where the Internet has actually put long-shot candidates in office. From this perspective, many authors argue that online politics only mirrors the distribution of political resources offline. For example, Vedel (1999) considers the Internet as a space of communication reflecting and even enhancing the pre-existing structures of domination. Benson (cited in Gingras, 1999: 59) also shares this perspective, stating that in spite of such freedom of expression given to them, online actors reproduce the arguments raised by the president, the

parliament and the media.

Another recurring question in the literature is whether Internet use has actually increased political participation such as voter turnout. Indeed, according to traditional behavioural theories of political participation, voter turnout is affected not only by socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. education, income, age, gender, etc.) of voters but also by changes in communication technology (e.g. preferred information sources). In line with the latter tenet, many researchers have examined the relationship between Internet use and voter turnout, but the findings are mixed. On the one hand, Tolbert and McNeal (2003) suggest that the Internet provides voters with a more transparent and diverse source of information about candidates and elections and, in consequence, significantly increases the probability of voting. Reynolds (2006) also supports for this "participatory reinvigoration" motion, emphasising on the Internet's potential to encourage the political activity of those who would are likely disengaged from offline politics. On the other hand, many stay sceptical, stating to the contrary that "Internet access is not predictive of voting or other forms of political participation" (Bimber, 2001: 61). Best and Krueger's study (2005) adds that the Internet only marginally advantages the political voice of young liberals.

A challenge that Internet researchers face lies in the fact that incidents of Internet politics do not fit neatly into either of the competing categories of equalisation and normalisation (Hara and Jo, 2007). For example, is Roh's victory an example of the equalising potential of Internet use or the reinforcement of generational and ideological gaps within society? What made Roh different from other underdog candidates including Howard Dean, who have not made through to office? Was Roh's case a one-off happening, unlikely to be repeated in the forthcoming elections in Korea or elsewhere? Such questions consequently bring attention to the contextual factors of each incident when it comes to the discussion to what extent the Internet makes a qualitative difference to how politics operates. A general agreement in the emerging literature (Banerjee, 2003; Ho et al., 2003; Ducke, 2004; Goggin, 2007; Kluver et al., 2007) is that 'Internet effects' on politics are inextricably entwined with the social conditions existing in a given society before the advent of the Internet, ranging from the achieved level of democratic or economic development to offline political culture.

For the present paper, Klotz (2004: 203) offers a useful departure point when he states "The potential impact of the Internet would be greatest in nations limiting political

freedom where it is mainly used as a vehicle for political opposition." By discussing what about the Internet worked particularly for Roh and *Nosamo*, the paper aims to question back whether the Korean case really represents a greater impact of Internet politics, and how the country's offline political development and culture shape and get shaped by it.

Methodology

A data corpus was established through the "strategic sequencing of [multiple] methods" (Brewer and Hunter, 1989: 84), in order to produce a thorough examination of the subject as well as that of the richness of its contexts. First, I explored *Nosamo*'s website (http://www.nosamo.org/), the very platform for the formation and development of the organisation [**Fig 1**]. It was rather fortunate for me as a researcher that the site has a complete archive of what has been put up since its launch on 13 April 2000. The site has gone through three major restructurings, but the earlier versions were even kept accessible via hyperlinks (http://old.nosamo.org/ and http://old2.nosamo.org/home/index.asp) for consultation [**Fig 2**]. The analytical criteria include (i) how the structure of the website has evolved, (ii) what kind of facilities the website provides to its users, (iii) how open and accessible the content is to outsiders, and (iv) what kind of outgoing links it provides. After I looked at the material properties of the site as an outsider, I also signed up for the site. I then imagined myself as a generic *Nosamo* member and followed how I would get to know other members, how a message I put up would reach out, and how I would receive others' messages. I particularly focused on group dynamics on different bulletin boards within the site.

Next, I moved on to meet the people who actually run the organisation and listen to their version of the tale. A notable change I made to my initial fieldwork plan was to rely less on online interviews and to redirect my attention to face-to-face ones. I initially thought instant messenger interviews would be my main method of data collection and face-to-face ones supplementary. However, I realised as soon as I carried out an ethnographical study on the website that despite the stereotypical image of online activists as 'Internet freaks', my potential interviewees were not as enthusiastic about online synchronous chatting as I had previously assumed, and that online mobilisation in the Korean context was very much merged with offline activity. Therefore, conducting online interviews in order to keep the anonymous environment of Internet communications did not seem particularly relevant given such circumstances.

Respondents were selected by chain referral sampling, also known as snowball or network sampling. This technique worked in favour of the case studied for the following two reasons. For one, although *Nosamo* claims to have been operating with no clearly defined leadership, there certainly are actors who are more visible and influential than others. The particular technique of sampling naturally led the researcher to such key players as interviewees tended to redirect me to them. The other reason is that during the first phase of fieldwork, the negative publicity for *Nosamo* was most pronounced. The members were therefore very wary of journalists and researchers. Nevertheless, access to the organisation was granted relatively smoothly as I had conducted a formal interview with its management when I was writing a dissertation, "*L'Espace public sur Internet ? : une étude de cas de la 16ème élection présidentielle de Corée du Sud en 2002* [Public Sphere on the Internet: a case study of the 16th presidential election in South Korea in December 2002]", for the Diplôme d'Études Approfondies (DEA) in 2004 at l'Université Stendhal-Grenoble III, France. I was welcomed, largely because of the fact that I was introduced (and spoken positively of) by its own members. I was even invited to a few exclusive offline meetings, where I conducted participant observation.

During and after conducting interviews with 28 sampled pro-Roh online users and observing 3 offline gatherings [**Table 1**], I went back to their websites and retrieved the interviewees' online contributions put up on the sites. By doing so, I was not only able to see Internet-specific discursive practice, if any, but also to compare what they said in the interviews (i.e. self-consciously produced data) and what they actually did (i.e. non-directive data). No ethical risks were identified as the interviewees themselves suggested I come over their sites and read their earlier postings. Besides, the content of their websites is – unlike that of discussion lists – generally open to the public, so the interviewees were aware of the possibility for me to read their posts and comments.

There is an element of image management in Goffman's self-presentation sense (1959), but that is about any social interaction. Rather, as the postings were produced prior to and independently from the interviews, their gate-keeping was relatively low. In traditional media studies, a respected yet challenging research method is a diary study, by which research subjects are asked to keep a diary during a limited period to record their own user experiences (Haddon, 2005). A unique advantage of Internet data collection this thesis identifies is that such 'diaries' are already out there. They are even better than those that would have been produced in a traditional research setting because

research subjects are not self-conscious owing to the researcher's (virtual) presence when they are writing them. In other words, the 'penumbra' of digital data around the interview responses allows for cross-checking and deeper interrogation.

Findings

Based on the triangulated data collected from in-depth interviews, offline observation and virtual ethnography, the research findings of the present paper are as follows.

First of all, "technological affordances" have been considered a strong explanatory factor for South Korea's enthusiasm for the integration of the Internet into everyday life. To be more specific, the strong IT infrastructure laid during the previous administration, including the world's highest penetration of broadband access and a wide range of e-government initiatives, facilitates the process of expressing and exchanging one's political opinion, compared with the traditional procedures that insist on ritual-like formality. That said, *Nosamo*'s principal activity is to have frequent local meetings, both formally and informally. Bimber (1998: 151) underlines that "the often intangible normative force of face-to-face contact" is an irreducible element in the building of thick communities, which is why he argues that online technology is capable of nothing more than pseudo-community (1998: 147). In the chosen case, however, the anonymous nature of the online environment has little effect on the development of the organisation. Screen names and real names are interchangeably used in face-to-face meetings. Group emails are used to advertise news and events, but most of personal communication is done over the phone or offline.

Three main pillars of the website are online voting for internal matters, the archive of media appearances or records of other offline activities, and a pyramid of bulletin boards used to share ideological reflections and mobilisation strategies. On bulletin boards, a high level of interactivity and openness are manifested via (i) replies or comments made to a posting, (ii) thumb-up/down kind of evaluation of postings (for self-moderating) and (iii) citing other fellow members' sayings to legitimate one's political perspective. Such a high level of interactivity and member interdependence is explained by the level of ideological solidarity the community shares based on the fact that participants know exactly who they are talking to. To be more specific, most of the site content is open to the general public, but the right to upload postings or comments is restricted to members. Intentionally or not, members could spot "insincere members" by a variety of mechanisms such as personal details verification during signup process,

the quick displaying of previous postings put up by each member, and essential offline meetings the members are expected to attend.

Second, the discourse used by *Nosamo* was a typical example of the 'moral superiority' argument that the 80s' student activists (called *undongkwon*) drew upon: i.e. "We are morally superior to the political elite." Members of *undongkwon* claimed to be "a force of conscience", the true representative of the *minjung* (common people), and an agenda-setter (Lee, N., 2007: 95). The major ground for their action was that they were morally superior to the state because they spoke what the *minjung* truly wanted and needed, at their own expense. Lee (2007: 99) characterises their attempt to construct their identity as countervailing and oppositional to the state as "… a practice that was embedded in the traditional role of intellectuals, a long tradition of social criticism". Such a mentality was still widely presented. Indeed, key players in *Nosamo* are largely from what is dubbed the 386 generation. The '3' stands for the fact that they were in their 30s when the expression was coined, indicating they are "young and hungry for power and influence" (Sebastian, 2006). The '8' is for the 1980s when they attended university, heavily influenced by, and in many cases actively involved in the 80s' pro-democracy movement. The '6' is for the 1960s, the era of rapid Korean industrialisation, when they were born. They are highly educated and politicised. As many of them grew up with computers, they are also digitally adept, and eventually constituted the first generation of Korean Netizens.

All my interviewees considered and projected themselves as having a higher political consciousness than pre-Internet generations. They emphasised that any online action or inaction is their educated choice. For example, according to them, the decrease in the amount of inputs on their sites is "tactical silence", and the fast increase of online mobilisation for the conservative Grand National Party is "made happen by hired sock puppets" – in Klotz's words "Astroturf support" (2007) – as opposed to theirs being "genuine" grassroots support. It can be argued that such black-and-white messages hooked online surfers more effectively as they were less contentious and easy to receive in the online environment where communication takes place to a faster rhythm.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the existing literature, Roh Moo-hyun's victory in the Korean presidential election of 2002 has been portrayed as the effective appropriation of online technology and the consequent success in political mobilisation by the younger generation vis-à-vis the

'old' political cartel of the conservative parties and the traditional mass media. Indeed, the chosen case has become another tale about the equalising potential of the Internet in the political game. Besides the quantitatively drawn conclusion such as in Kim and Johnson (2006) and Han (2007), the present paper offers a qualitative explanation. Based on triangulated data collected from in-depth interviews, offline observation and virtual ethnography, this paper suggests that what Korea witnessed in the 2002 election was grassroots campaigning, but what *Nosamo* did was far from being as spontaneous and decentralised as online mobilisation is often described. Rather, it shares traits with the 1980s' Korean pro-democracy movement in the tactics and semiotics the organisation employed. The organisation also lays a strong emphasis on having a tightly-knit offline network and collective experience, which resemble *undongkwon* practice. The difference is that in the 1980s, being involved in *undongkwon* meant stigmatisation by the media and the National Security Law as 'pro-communist', the worst possible label one could have got in South Korea at that time.

What is unique about Korean online activism is that this so-called 386 generation systematically translated the 80s' movement legacies into e-politics by turning events like the 2002 election into a commemoration of the 1987 democratic transition. The role the Internet played in this translating process was not simply to allow for more efficient tools or spaces. The Internet (or the public's idealised perception of it) offered *Nosamo* an 'acceptable face' while opposing the dominant political cartel, whereas earlier they would have been marginalised from the political sphere by the authoritarian state. In short, what *Nosamo* benefited most is not from Internet-enabled networking or mobilising but from capitalising on the symbolic definitions of the Internet and e-democracy to do with free speech, transparency of information and grassroots power. On a finishing note, the paper invites further exploration how the public have reconceptualised the Internet owing to the routinisation of online activity and Roh's monopolisation of the Internet metaphor, and how such reconceptualisation might affect the next presidential election scheduled for December 2007.

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Appendix

[Fig 1] *Nosamo* website

(http://www.nosamo.org; screen captured on 24 Sep 2007)

[Fig 2] Initial version of the *Nosamo* website

(http://old.nosamo.org; screen captured on 24 Sep 2007)

[Table 1] Interview summary

	Date	Via	Age/Gender	Professions	Affiliations	Remarks
1	7 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	E-commerce	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	2h50m19s + Printouts
2	12 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	IT consultant	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	1h24m20s
3	15 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	Self-employed/ Defeated contestant in the 2006 local elections	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	1h21m10s
4	15 Jun 2006	F2F + Email	20s/F	Health care coordinator	Democratic Labor Party/ *DDanzi* anti-impeachment	58m46s
5	16 Jun 2006	F2F	40s/M	Local councillor	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party/ Yangcheon Community	1h52m19s
6	20 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/F	*Nosamo* webmaster	*Nosamo*	1h20m17s
7	21 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	Internet café owner	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	1h47m49s
8	21 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	Finance	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	
9	23 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	Freelance TV producer	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	1h04m02s + Blog
10	25 Jun 2006	F2F	30s/M	Student	n/a	34m45s
11	27 Jun 2006	Tel	40s/M	Self-employed	Uri Party/ Yangcheon Community	42m19s
12	28 Jun 2006	F2F	20s/M	IT consultant/ Political cartoon writer	n/a	1h26m
13	29 Jun 2006	Email	20s/M	E-commerce	n/a	1,322 words
14	12 Jul 2006	Email	40s/M	Tutor/ Journalist	*Nosamo*/ *DDanzi* anti-impeachment/ Anti-Chosun	1,234 words
15	25 Aug 2006	F2F	40s/M	MP	*Nosamo*/ *OhmyNews*/ *Seoprise*/ e-Party/ Uri Party	1h28m15s

16	27 Aug 2006	F2F	30s/M	Real estate agent	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party/ Yangcheon Community	2h06m31s
17	1 Sep 2006	F2F	30s/M	Car dealer	Uri Party/ Yangcheon Community	1h41m44s
18	6 Sep 2006	F2F	40s/M	Writer	*OhmyNews*/ Anti-Chosun	1h34m55s
19	7 Sep 2006	F2F + Email	60s/M	Writer	*OhmyNews*	59m51s + 11,977 ws
20	8 Sep 2006	Email	30s/M	International trading	Uri Party/ Yangcheon Community	1,733 words
21	11 Sep 2006	Email	20s/M	Student	n/a	1,514 words
22	13 Sep 2006	Email	30s/M	Self-employed	*OhmyNews*	4,096 words
23	14 Sep 2006	F2F + Email	40s/M	Professor	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	Approx. 1h
24	15 Sep 2006	F2F	40s/M	Tutor	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	59m51s
25	15 Sep 2006	F2F	40s/M	NGO	*Nosamo*/ Nowon Citizen Action	
26	15 Sep 2006	F2F	30s/M	Journalist	*OhmyNews*	1h10m24s
27	17 Sep 2006	Email	40s/M	Self-employed	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	747 words
28	20 Sep 2006	F2F + Email	40s/M	Medical doctor	*Nosamo*/ Uri Party	1h43m44s + 85,786 ws

[Table 2] Observation summary

	Date	**Occasions**	**No. of Participants**
1	10 Jun 2006 19.00-24.00	An internal meeting of the Uri Party for 2006 post-election analyses	±50 people
2	25 Aug 2006 21.00-23.00	The *Cyber Team* in the Uri Party [an association of supporters for a next presidential candidate]	±30 people
3	14 Sep 2006 20.00-02.00	*Yangcheon Community* [a district-based community for flexibly scheduled political discussions]	±20 people incl. a guest MP