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THE INTERNET AS AN AGENT OF POLITICAL CHANGE: 
THE CASE OF “ROHSAMO” IN THE SOUTH KOREAN 
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN OF 2002

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Abstract

Roh Moo-hyun's victory on December 19, 2002, represents a major watershed in modern day South Korean politics. In this exploratory case study, we draw on historical research on the impact of the printing press on the Protestant Reformation and on the literature on the mass media and the Internet in politics to explain how the Internet influenced this presidential election outcome. Both the Internet and the Gutenberg printing press technologies dramatically changed how information was communicated. The printing press broke the control held by the Catholic Church over religious information in Europe; the Internet significantly changed how political information was communicated in South Korea where broadband access rates are four times higher than in the U.S., providing an effective alternative medium for the exchange of political information. The Church was suspicious of the quality of publications through the print media and failed to recognize its potential while Luther actively embraced it; unlike Roh, the opposing candidate as well as the print media in South Korea were wary of the information transmitted through the Internet and heavily criticized online activities. The historical parallels from this case will enable us to draw on lessons from the past in order to better understand the potential impact of the Internet in societal context. In this research, we examine the role the Internet played in Roh Moo-hyun's upset victory in 2002. In addition to serving as an alternative source of information, the Internet was also used as a tool to coordinate Roh Moo-hyun's supporters. Rohsamo, an online group of Roh Moo-hyun supporters, became the focal organizing structure around which the efforts of individual supporters were coordinated.

Keywords: Internet, Rohsamo, South Korea, printing press, political participation, broadband

Introduction

You [Netizens] participated through the Internet…and proved that it is possible to effect political change. You are responsible for the political revolution of December 19

(Roh Moo-hyun, Thank you Address to Netizens, December 30, 2002)=

Printing is God’s ultimate and greatest gift…through printing God wants the whole world…to know the roots of true religion and wants to transmit it in every language.

(Martin Luther, circa 1520 cited in Gilmont 1998, p. 1)
The presidential campaign of 2002 is a major watershed in modern day Korean politics. Roh Moo-hyun’s upset victory represents a dramatic generational shift in Korean politics (Moon and Clifford 2003). Political commentators contend that the Internet played an important role during the campaign at crucial points when the candidacy of Roh was threatened (Clifford and Moon 2003; Watts 2003). As the world’s leader in broadband penetration and Internet usage, the South Korean case can shed light on how widespread broadband Internet access may affect political processes in developing countries. Owing partly to aggressive government policy, South Korea has become the world’s leader in broadband Internet access with 67 percent household penetration (Lee et al. 2003). South Korea’s broadband penetration rate is four times higher than the United States, 60 times higher than the United Kingdom, and twice that of Canada (Belson and Richtel 2003; Herz 2002).

How did Roh Moo-hyun, who had been the four-time loser in local elections, win the South Korean presidential election on December 19, 2002? Although several academics predicted that the Internet could have an impact on the presidential campaign in South Korea, there have been few detailed empirical case studies of this impact following the election (see, for example, Yoon 2002). In this paper, we focus on the role played by self-organized voluntary political groups on the Internet in Roh’s presidential campaign, focusing on “Rohsamo”—an acronym for “Roh Moo-hyun Lovers Group.” Rohsamo leveraged the many-to-many communication capabilities of the Internet to disseminate and critically discuss political information. The Internet and widespread broadband penetration made it possible for a large number of voters to seek alternative views and political information unfiltered by mass media. The Internet represents a major change in how people communicate and disseminate political information analogous to the change in how religious information and views disseminated following the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in the 16th century.

The historical parallels between the effect of the Internet on how the average citizen gains access to political information in South Korea today and the effect of the Gutenberg printing press on how religious information was produced and disseminated during the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe are striking. By reducing the cost of production, the printing press revolutionized the way in which information was collected, stored, retrieved, and disseminated as well as the way in which this information was used to produce knowledge. It broke the control held by the Catholic Church over religious information and enabled the widespread dissemination of the Bible in vernacular languages and Luther’s ideas to the general public. It represented the first “true” one-to-many communication technology (Dewar 1998). Information was no longer controlled by an elite group of people, but preserved in print and disseminated to a wider public. Elizabeth Eisenstein argues in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, from which this paper gets its title, that the availability of multiple versions of biblical texts made possible by the printing press precipitated the Protestant Reformation through exposure to different interpretations (Eisenstein 1979). (See Figure 1 for a summary of the major parallels.)

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*Figure 1. Parallels between the Printing Press and the Internet*

In this paper, we will examine how the Internet’s many-to-many communications capabilities may have affected the 2002 presidential election outcome by focusing on the activities of Rohsamo. We will conduct an analysis of the archives of online discussions of the participants of Rohsamo in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the socio-demographic profile of Rohsamo participants and their everyday political activities and discussions. After a description of the history of Rohsamo and the 2002 South Korean presidential campaign (see Figure 2 for a time line of major events), we provide a brief overview of related work on the effect of the mass media and the Internet on politics. We then describe our research approach and conclude with some preliminary propositions from our research to date and anticipated outcomes from the research.

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1Due to the convergence of digital communication technologies, the Internet may encompass multiple forms and functions. In this research, the Internet refers to the network of interconnected communication networks linking people to other people and institutions through diverse devices (e.g., computers, mobile devices) and enabling node-to-node transmission and communication of information.
Background: South Korea’s 2002 Presidential Campaign and Rohsamo

In mid-April 2000, immediately after Roh Moo-hyun’s loss in the election for the Pusan representative to the National Assembly, supporters logged onto his official Web site and posted supporting messages on its electronic bulletin boards. The loss was shocking to those outside Pusan because of Roh’s lead in national opinion polls as one of the most promising politicians in Korea. Roh Moo-hyun had run for the National Assembly in Pusan rather than in Seoul. The Pusan area is not a stronghold of Roh’s party and most voters conventionally voted for the opposition leader in previous elections. Roh’s decision represented a significant departure from the safe haven of Seoul and was a political move that resonated with the citizens who were disillusioned with regional politics. Thousands of people posted encouraging messages on the boards during the days following this loss; on average 3,000 people visited the homepage and 500 people posted their opinions online each day (Chung 2000). This outpouring of support triggered one well-known participant within the group to suggest that they start a new discussion group for fans of Roh Moo-hyun who identified with his political courage. The new fan club was soon launched through one of many available services for the free hosting of discussion groups. Within 10 days, over 300 people of all ages, including teenagers and senior citizens, distributed nationwide, registered as members of the group. By the end of April, the free service was proving insufficient for the increased new membership. Group members soon contributed the necessary resources for independent hosting of Rohsamo by May 2000.

Rohsamo did not set out to make Roh Moo-hyun the president of South Korea. Initially it was simply a fan club: people disillusioned with the political process in Korea joined Rohsamo because they perceived Roh Moo-hyun to be a politician with strong convictions against regionalism. His appeal can be better understood in light of his having become a prominent politician as a prosecution lawyer in the congressional hearings investigating the corruption in the Korean government in 1987. Rohsamo’s goals shifted as its membership changed throughout the two years leading up to the presidential election. The most dramatic change came during the Kwangju primaries in March of 2002. During this period, over 1,000 new members registered on Rohsamo each day. Membership increased dramatically from just over 5,000 before the Kwangju primaries to over 80,000 in May 2003.

Rohsamo provided an alternative forum within which people could share political information and opinions, providing a different perspective from that of the major dailies. The major print daily newspaper in South Korea, Chosunilbo, read by over 70 percent of the Korean population, supports the political party of Lee Hoi-chang. Rohsamo appears to have played a key role in critical moments throughout Roh Moo-hyun’s road to the presidency. When the major print dailies were critical of Roh Moo-hyun, people turned to the Internet and Rohsamo for alternative perspectives of political events and issues (Yoon 2002). Members wrote and sent handwritten letters supporting Roh and coordinated campaign fund-raising activities both online and offline when internal friction within Roh’s party threatened the financial viability of his continued candidacy, managing to raise over $700,000 in seven days. When real time polls on the day of the election indicated that Roh was trailing Lee Hoi-chang, Rohsamo members coordinated through the homepage to send text messages to mobilize the Roh supporters to vote. There were over 1,500 posts on the Rohsamo forums on that single day.

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2Roh Moo-hyun’s official homepage was http://www.knowhow.or.kr. Today this address has been allocated to Cheong Wa Dae, the homepage for the Office of the President of South Korea. The old pages that used to reside at this address can now be viewed at http://before.knowhow.or.kr.

3According to a recent media survey by the Korea Press Foundation, the satisfaction with the print media dropped from 3.08 in 1996 to 2.76 in 2002 on a five-point Likert type satisfaction scale. The satisfaction with the Internet was higher at 3.18. A breakdown of satisfaction with the print press reveals that people are particularly dissatisfied with the political press articles.
Related Work

There has been much research on the potential impact of the Internet on politics (for some recent reviews, see Agre 2002; DiMaggio et al. 2001). Mirroring research on the impact of technology in other areas, initial utopian perspectives were countered by more cautionary studies revealing that the Internet may serve to reinforce and amplify existing relationships and structures in the political system (e.g., Davis 1999). Few studies, however, have explicitly studied the impact of the many-to-many communications among individual citizens on the Internet on the political process. The existing empirical studies indicate that the Internet has had the greatest impact in mobilizing social movements (e.g., Deibert 2000; Leizerov 2000).

A well-informed public is an essential component of a democratic political process. The print mass media play an important role in disseminating political information and even in the electoral outcome in some cases (for the example of Mexico, see Lawson 2002). When the mass media is dominated by one particular political power, the public is unable to make informed political decisions. The Internet has dramatically changed how people access, store, share, and expand on political information. It provides an alternative source of political information to the print mass media. In addition to providing access to alternative sources of information, the Internet enables communication with other people with shared interests and goals leading to the formation of interest groups and communities such as Rohsamo, the focus of our study. The effect of such political talk en masse has not previously been investigated with the exception of a recently published study about the conversation effect in the British electorate in 1992: Pattie and Johnston (2002) found that individuals who had not voted for a particular party were more likely to switch and vote for the party when they had engaged in discussion with supporters of the party than when they had discussed with non-party supporters. This effect was found to depend on the quality of the conversation itself rather than on the socioeconomic status or political expertise of the discussant. A secondary effect of active participation in online groups is that participants develop a stronger sense of identification with the identity associated with the group. McKenna and Bargh (1998), for instance, found that people who participated actively in online groups related to a stigmatized identity were more likely to come out, i.e., embrace their identity in the offline world as well. The Internet has enabled such voter-to-voter discussions to occur in public with additional functionalities for participants to quickly identify quality discussions when visiting the site. Discussions that gain higher ratings can be made more prominently visible on the group homepage. The discussions are also archived and searchable from any place, any time increasing the potential of many more passive participants benefitting from the public nature of the discussion.

The Internet in this way has revolutionized the way in which people collect, store, retrieve, share, disseminate, and make sense of political information. Others have argued that we can draw on lessons from the past, i.e., the printing revolution, to understand how to best manage the impact of the information revolution represented by the Internet and related technologies (e.g., Dewar 1998). In this research, we compare the impact of the printing press on the Protestant Reformation through its revolutionary effect on information culture to the impact of the Internet on South Korea’s presidential campaign through its effect on how political information is produced and disseminated through people’s interactions online.

Research Approach

We rely on an in-depth case study of Rohsamo in order to understand how the Internet may affect how political information is produced and shared. We focus initially on this particular case because of its rich history and unique context of widespread household penetration of the broadband Internet. First, we expected that a detailed history of a particular case was necessary for a richer understanding of the impact of the Internet on the political process. We focused our case on Rohsamo in order to focus further on the effect of the many-to-many communications revolution in political information processes. Second, the South Korean case presents a rich context in which to examine the implications of widespread broadband access on citizen political participation. While it has been argued that the Internet will have a democratizing effect due to lowered costs of communication and access to information, the existence of the digital divide has led to conclusions that the Internet will not in fact democratize a nation since the Internet does not represent all groups equally (e.g., Davis 1999). The South Korean case presents insight into

Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1996) have argued that the Internet may further fragment a community if people have greater control and ability to find people with shared interests. Preliminary analysis of our case suggests that this is true to some extent in the case of Rohsamo and other alternative media. However, this perspective is not the explicit focus of this research-in-progress, and will become better understood as we complete our case analysis.

Some preliminary evidence from the discussion archives suggest that participants were more likely to talk to others about Roh Moo-hyun as a result of participating in the group. In some cases, these informal conversations led to some vote switchers.
what might be possible when there is widespread broadband penetration. South Korea invested in broadband infrastructure in the wake of the economic crisis in the late 1990s (Lee et al. 2003). It has since become the world’s leader in terms of broadband penetration and Internet use. Widespread broadband access and heavy Internet usage were in fact the enabling conditions for the Rohsamo case. Third, South Korea as a young democracy offers a unique opportunity to study the impact on political processes of the Internet as an alternative mass medium. The Internet had the impact that it did partly due to the perceived one-sidedness of the coverage in the print media.

Through an in-depth case study, this research will show the actual online political activities as well as the shifts in opinions and attitudes within Rohsamo during the campaign. Our research to date has relied on archival analyses of Rohsamo historical documents and other secondary sources such as print and online media. We are in the process of collecting data from the actual archived discussions at Rohsamo using automated Web crawlers. We have completed the collection of header information from the archived messages, that is, information regarding the subject, sender, and date of each message, as well as the number of times each message was viewed. This information will enable us to gain a better understanding of who participates and what participants discuss. This will allow us to provide further insight into whether political discussions online actually did result in changes in offline political activities and voting behavior.

Anticipated Outcomes

While the impact of the Internet on the political process has been the subject of much debate, there have been relatively few studies that examined how the true many-to-many nature of this new communication medium has led to a qualitatively different role played by individual citizens in an issue that affects the nation as a whole. The current research studies how the Internet-enabled citizens distributed geographically to coordinate a voluntary self-organized political campaign of a presidential candidate, and the role it played in his campaign. By investigating the factors and processes that contributed to the success of Rohsamo, we hope to shed light on the impact of widespread broadband penetration and access to the Internet on the political process. In addition, our research-in-progress will have implications for the potential implications of a widening digital divide and the resultant underrepresentation of certain groups of the population in the political process. Rohsamo was a success because the Internet was used more heavily by the people whose votes were essential to Roh Moo-hyun’s candidacy as an alternative outlet for sharing political information. If we envision a future in which the Internet is to play an increasingly important role, it is essential that we understand the implications of the digital divide on the democratic process.

References


