

PANEL I: THE INTERNET AND JAPAN'S NEIGHBORS
NETIZENS AND SOUTH KOREAN POLITICS
CITIZENS' POWER DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION 2002

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In the mid 1980s and early 1990s, when a new age of information society emerged with the Internet, a very engaged discourse on "strong democracy" set in. The expectations regarding new forms of political participation made possible by the Internet had strengthened the belief in direct democracy. It was the time when in Western countries, especially in Germany, the belief in the effectiveness of democratic representation within the established political system had become weaker and the criticism of parliamentary democracy in mass societies had become stronger. In this depressing state of affairs, the Internet seemed to offer a new perspective for democracy. This was the reason why the discourse on the Internet focused on the possibility of direct democracy through the e-community.

However, the experience of the 1990s was quite disappointing for those political scientists who had hoped for such a change. There was no sign of a significant turnaround in political participation through the Internet, not to mention direct democracy. Even as the Internet spread more widely, the general disinterest for politics did not improve. As a result, the enthusiasm for Internet-based politics, i. e. e-politics, has disappeared recently. Instead, political scientists question the importance of the Internet for politics as such. They even deny the usefulness of e-elections and argue that they would not be able to replace the conventional electoral systems (Buchstein 2003).

Here we should ask whether the expectations associated with the rise of the Internet were exaggerated. This new technology certainly offers a fresh perspective for political participation. Yet, it is just a medium. As long as this medium is not actively used by voters for political participation it can hardly do anything for the renewal of our political systems. In this sense, the research on e-politics ought to ask who accepts and uses the Internet as a medium for political participation, why, how and when.

From this perspective, if the Internet did not have a significant impact on politics in Germany or elsewhere in Western society, this cannot be

considered a problem of the Internet as such, but instead a matter of political culture in these societies. As empirical research in Germany has shown, there is no significant difference in the political behavior between groups who work with the Internet and those who do not use the Internet to get political information (Vowe/Emmer 2003).

However, in the case of Korea, the political behavior of those who obtain political information mainly through the Internet and those who depend mostly on newspapers is extremely different. This became apparent during the Korean presidential election campaign of 2002.

I. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2002

On December 19, 2002, Korea elected Roh Moo Hyun, a former Member of Parliament and a well-known lawyer for human rights and labor affairs, as its new president. His victory was a great surprise for many people because he had always been an outsider in Korean politics. Furthermore, he had no financial basis and little support within his own party. His only advantage was his popularity among the younger generations below forty. Yet, for most observers this was not nearly enough to win the presidential election – particularly because the electoral participation of these younger generations declined steadily during the 1990s.

Nevertheless, Roh Moo Hyun won the elections due to the support of the below forties. Therefore, it is widely considered that the presidential election of 2002 was decided along a generational line. The print media in Korea spoke of an “electoral revolution by the young generation.” The *International Herald Tribune* wrote: “Korea’s answer to Generation X sent a resounding signal in this month’s election to the older generation of men who run South Korea.” It then criticized the foreign media which generally misunderstood the situation. According to the newspaper, “the impression overseas is that Roh Moo Hyun rode a wave of anti-American sentiment to victory that the acquittal of two U.S. servicemen in the deaths of two Korean girls decided a national election” (*International Herald Tribune*, 30.12.2002: 11).

But this “electoral revolution” was possible because the younger generation had mobilized themselves through the Internet. In this sense, the victory of Roh Moo Hyun needs to be regarded neither as a confrontation between generations nor as an expression of high-running emotions of Anti-Americanism. Rather, it ought to be seen as a victory of the Internet against the print media, traditionally the most important gatekeeper in Korea.

Print media have dominated the formation of public opinion in Korea since the beginning of the democratization process in 1987 (Choi 2002:

30). The three major daily newspapers (*Chosun Ilbo*, *Donga Ilbo*, *Jungang Ilbo*) have a market share of 70%. During the presidential election campaign, these newspapers decisively favored Lee Hoe Chang, the candidate of the opposition party. They presented Roh Moo Hyun as a threat to the security and the well-being of the nation. This critical and strong-willed politician was uncomfortable for them, among other things because he insisted on the democratization of the media. *Chosun Ilbo*, among others, warned voters up to the last moment not to give their vote to Roh Moo Hyun (*Chosun Ilbo* 19.12.2002).

However, against many expectations, Roh Moo Hyun could win the presidential election because, as Leggewie and Bieber argue (2001: 38), “interactive online communication offers [the citizen] more informational self-determination.” In fact, the monolithic strength of the traditional gatekeepers was considerably weakened by Internet communication. The formation of public opinion in Korea became much less dependent on the dominant print media alone.

It surely seems a bit hasty – merely on the basis of one singular event, the presidential election of 2002 – to talk of the advent of the “well-informed citizen.” However, thanks to the fast and wide diffusion of the new media democracy in Korea, it might well have found a way to overcome one problem that has plagued the country since 1987. That is, the problem of the “delegative” character of its political representators.

The Internet has opened new possibilities of political participation and control by citizens. In this sense the presidential election of 2002 can be considered a turning point in the development of Korean democracy – which is also the main point of this paper.

It has become normal for political parties, individual politicians, and political organizations in Korea to have their own Internet homepages and to use them, for example, during election campaigns.¹ Political parties engage professional web-teams who design their homepages, create chat rooms and structure discussion boards on web sites. All this is standard for political parties, yet as such it has had only a minor impact on politics in Korea.

What has had a much larger impact, and what is much more interesting from the point of view of an analysis of e-politics in Korea, is something else: Quite apart from parties and political organizations, citizens have learned to use the Internet as a new forum for political participation. This

¹ The present electoral law allows political propaganda during election campaigns not only on the homepages of politicians and parties, but also on portal sites. The members of portal sites can be addressed by e-mail.

has led to a certain renewal of the political culture in Korea, clearly seen during the presidential election campaign of 2002.

II. INTERNET AS AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIUM

During the presidential election campaign, the Internet became an alternative medium in Korea. This was possible due to the available infrastructure. According to a survey by the Korean Internet Information Center, about 70 % of Korean households had Internet access in June 2002. There were 25.6 million Internet users (out of a total population of 45 million), of which 62.2 % used the Internet every day (*Sisa Journal*, 03.01.2003), and on average for more than two hours.

Just after the presidential election, *Hankook Ilbo*, one of the major daily newspapers in Korea, wrote that the most important contribution to the victory of Roh had been made by President Kim Dae Jung and the Ministry of Information and Telecommunication. But why? Because Kim Dae Jung and this ministry had promoted IT industry and the Internet, because the Internet was most accessible to people under 40 and, in particular, because the Internet had created rather uniform attitudes among the latter. As a result, Roh won the election in spite of widespread unfavorable reporting in the established printed newspapers (*Sisa Journal* 28.12.2002).

It is true that without the substantial public and private investments in modern information technology the massive mobilization of citizens during the presidential election campaign would not have been possible. The government of Kim Dae Jung had promoted this new industry vigorously in the belief that it would offer a new perspective to the Korean economy, which had suffered so much on the back of the financial crisis of 1997/98. The share of IT industries in the Gross National Product (GNP) rose from 8.1 % in 1996 to 12.1 % in 2000. In 1996, 14.1 % of economic growth could be attributed to these new industries. In 2000, they contributed 50.4 % toward it. The government provided 144 regions in Korea with broadband cables. In October 2001, 7.3 million households (51 % of all households) had broadband Internet access – the highest share in the world. Since August 2000 all primary and secondary schools have cost-free access to the Internet (Korean Information Agency 2001).

Equally, the Korean government began introducing e-government in a two-step process in 1998. With the installation of the “reform of civil application service G4C,” the system became operational for the central government and for 232 local governments in November 2002. Already in May 2001 electronic signatures had reached a share of more than 80 %

of all signatures in public services. The new government of Roh Moo Hyun outlined a "road map" for the completion of e-government: From 2007 onwards, citizens will be able to file all administrative procedures with central and local governments through the Internet, while all local governments will share the same databases. The new system is intended to increase the effectiveness of public administration and its propinquity to citizens and their concerns. Public opinion and public administration are expected to become more directly linked (inews24.com, 20.06.2003).

In Korea, the use of the Internet and the realization of e-government are considered an integral part of the development of future society.² There is no controversial discussion on the introduction of e-government. Instead, the main concern of the public and the government lies in how to solve the technical problems involved in this project as well as improving its efficiency and transparency. Another concern regards the protection of the individual's privacy.

Despite this basically positive attitude toward IT, the Internet and e-government, it is often expressed that many laws have not kept up with the fast evolution of information society, particularly in the realms of political participation of citizens and election campaigning. As one Member of Parliament noted, the dissemination of e-politics was so fast that the question is not whether candidates and parties should be allowed to campaign via the Internet, but to what extent they should be allowed to do so (inews24.com, 04.04.2003).³ According to public opinion, the development of e-politics should continue because it involves lower costs and higher levels of active political participation, as was shown during the presidential election of 2002.

III. THE POWER OF THE NETIZEN

In 2002, and for the first time in Korean history, the power of the so-called *netizen* ("citizen in the net") made itself felt. At the beginning of the year a spontaneous call to action by Korean *netizens* drew worldwide attention. The *netizens* felt betrayed by the disqualification of a Korean short-

² Special report "Digital is the Future" in the Internet newspaper *Digital Times* (16.06.2003).

³ At present, a number of issues are discussed in Korea. One is the issue of Internet-based elections. Another one is the protection of privacy of citizens, in particular how to protect their e-mail address against misuse. Yet another one is the activities of political supporter groups.

track speed-skating athlete during the Winter Olympics and organized a cyber protest. In the course of a similar cyber action in June the "red demons," supporters of the Korean National Team during the FIFA World Cup, exchanged information via the Internet how to mobilize themselves for off-line action. They emerged all over the country and filled the streets and public spaces of Korean cities. The pictures of enthusiastic crowds in a festive mood traveled around the world.

In November 2002, the *netizens* became active again. Every Wednesday night, they converted the large square in front of Seoul City Hall into an enormous sea of candlelight, mourning the deaths of two schoolgirls on June 13 of the same year. But they also wanted to express their protest and anger against the US, which reneged responsibility for the deaths, and against the acquittal by an American military tribunal of the two US soldiers who had caused the tragedy. In the months before this verdict, events related to these deaths were continuously reported in Internet newspapers. At the same time, a lively on-line discussion of these events took place.

In sharp contrast to these developments in the Internet, the print media scarcely published any reports or comments on this matter, presumably because they wanted to minimize the damage to American-Korean relations. Only after the acquittal of the two soldiers, and in view of the large demonstrations taking place, they began to report more extensively and even joined the voices coming from the Internet which demanded modifications to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), i. e. the lopsided treaty between the two countries on how US soldiers in Korea are treated when accused of a crime.

In relation to these events, Kim Jae Hong, a professor for communications science and contributor to the Internet newspaper *Oh my news*, blamed the print media for escalating anti-Americanism in Korea. He wrote:

"Both the Korean and the US government did not give much importance to this problem, because the large newspapers almost did not write anything about it. With respect to Korea, the US government relies heavily on the Korean daily press, in particular the English editions of the *Chosun Ilbo* and the *Jungang Ilbo*. Because these did not report on the problem, the US government did not take it seriously. Therefore, these large newspapers are to be blamed for the fact that things have become so complicated." (*Kyunghyang Shinmun* 30.12.2002)

Indeed, the large dailies in Korea have a tendency to consider public opinion an object which they can control and manipulate according to their conservative preferences. This became apparent during the presidential election campaign of 2002, during which all large papers presented Roh Moo Hyun

as a politician who would endanger the future of the country.⁴ In their reports and their comments, they most clearly favored Lee Hoe Chang, the candidate of the opposition party.⁵ Never had a politician won elections against the will of these newspapers (*Sisa Journal*, 03.01.2002). Only Roh Moo Hyun managed to do so – thanks to the support of the *netizens*.

In that sense, the election of 2002 was a power struggle between the main print media and the Internet. When the conservative dailies tried – as they have always done during election times – to appeal to the feelings of anti-communism, for instance by pressing the issue of North Korean missiles and nuclear weapons in oversized headlines (the largest since September 11, 2001), Internet newspapers like *Oh my news*, *Pressian* and *Daejabo* reacted immediately by denouncing these efforts. Similarly, when the opposition party and the main dailies used a speech by Roh Moo Hyun with clear manipulative intentions, the full text of his speech was published on the Internet immediately.

The same immediate reaction could be observed when the daily newspapers accused the Internet newspapers as undemocratic and vulgar (*Donga Ilbo*, 10.12.2002). The same day, the Internet newspaper *NGO Times* commented:

“Because the traditional media, in particular the conservative newspapers controlled by a few families, by means of their selective and manipulative reporting have made every effort to ignore the most important problems of the country, as for example the labor and peasant problem, and to propagate an anti-national, pro-American, subservient attitude in our society, the Internet newspapers developed as an alternative and as a means to transform the media in Korea as such.” (*NGO Times*, 10.12.2002)

Political analysts in Korea agree that the Internet played such an important role in the presidential election of 2002⁶ mainly because it unmasked the manipulations by the large printed newspapers as well as reflecting

⁴ The conflict between Roh Moo Hyun and the large newspapers, in particular *Chosun Ilbo*, dates back to the time when he was Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. From the beginning, he was one of very few politicians who criticized these newspapers.

⁵ On the eve of the elections, FIFA-Vice-President Chung Mong-Joon withdrew his support of Roh Moo Hyun. The next day, *Chosun Ilbo* published an editorial under the headline “Chung Mong-Joon throws away Roh Moo Hyun.” The article explained this arguing that Chung had realized at the last moment what an enormous danger Roh Moo Hyun was for the country (*Chosun Ilbo*, 19.12.2002).

⁶ During the last days before Election Day the Internet newspaper *Oh my news* registered more than 10 million hits every day (*Sisa Journal*, 03.01.2002).

the desires of the *netizens* and because it managed to open up the debate for everyone (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 24.12.2002). In this manner, the large printed newspapers were defeated during the election by the Internet as an open political medium that excelled in a broadly based formation of public opinion (*Hankyoreh*, 25.12.2002).

The strength of this new medium lies in its openness and the speed in which it manages to disseminate information and opinions, while the anonymity of the Internet further contributes to the unimpeded expression of opinions. Contributions to the various Internet newspapers were discussed extensively and critically by *netizens*. Whatever they considered important or simply liked, they would send to other Internet sites or distribute by e-mail. The younger generations, which had distanced themselves from politics, gained a new interest in politics and were united in this through the Internet. In a sense, the *netizens* mobilized themselves into the political realm, exercising their power as citizens.

A good example for this is the fan club "Nosamo" and the Internet homepage of Roh Moo Hyun (www.knowhow.or.kr). Nosamo appeared in June 2002, supporting Roh Moo Hyun. Because of regionalism – a Korean peculiarity: voters who cast their vote in favor of the candidate who was born in the same region as themselves – Roh Moo Hyun had lost the parliamentary elections in June 2000. As a result, about a hundred *netizens* met in a café in Daejeon and created an e-community which organizes online and off-line activities to support Roh Moo Hyun. This was the beginning of a profound change in the way elections were to be held in Korea.

When Roh Moo Hyun declared his candidacy almost nobody believed that he had a chance to win the primary elections of his party. He could neither match the financial resources of his opponents nor did he have a solid base in his own party – but then Nosamo stepped in. The members of this e-community sent e-mails to delegates and organized "a cheerful revolt"⁷ in each city where the primary elections took place. During the primaries between February and April 2002, its membership grew so fast that it doubled every two or three days. In December 2002, the number of registered members of Nosamo reached 74,000.

Comparing this number to the number of people working in the political organizations of other politicians, Nosamo was not necessarily a very big organization. But Nosamo was different from other organizations. Its members had not been mobilized "from above" by political organizations, instead they had decided by themselves to participate in this e-community. Unlike mobilization from above, they did not expect anything in return and even paid the membership fee. They converted the campaign

⁷ The title of a chat page on www.nosamo.org, the homepage of Nosamo.

into a festival, enjoying themselves with music and dance. Up until then, the country had “not experienced politics in such an interesting and pleasurable way” (Jeong 2003: 57).

The spirit of this movement was captured in an article of one of the smaller national newspapers. It wrote: “This is the first fan club that has been organized around a politician. Its members are people of both sexes, of different ages and social classes. Within the cyberspace of the Internet and in its campaign events it has demonstrated new possibilities of digital, direct democracy through online and offline activities” (*Munhwa Ilbo*, 21.12.2002).

The members of Nosamo exchanged opinions online and spread informative articles or news to other web sites. In March and April 2002, Nosamo registered more than 1,000 messages from members each day. Other visitors of the site directly commented these messages, with each message being clicked on by more than 100 visitors on average, sometimes even by more than 400 (*Newsmaker*, 04.04.2002).⁸ In 2002, the Nosamo-web site averaged more than 1 million clicks per day (*Digital Times*, 23.12.2002). After the homepage was prohibited by the National Election Commission because of violation of the election law, Nosamo was integrated into the web site of the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) under the name of “Million supporters movement” (www.100dan.org, last accessed on 19. December 2002).

Roh Moo Hyun’s homepage was clicked as often as Nosamo. Within the first two weeks of April 2002, during the primaries of the ruling party, more than 10 million visitors were registered. Roh Moo Hyun’s homepage was the most popular of all web sites belonging to politicians. 66,3 % of all visitors of politicians’ homepages clicked his page in March 2002 (*Sindonga*, May 2002: 2).⁹ From April 2002 until the election, more than 100,000 *netizens* visited Roh’s homepage every day, leaving more than 7,000 messages per day. These *netizens* did not hesitate to underline their commitment with financial support. From the beginning of the primaries at the end of February 2002 until the middle of April, Roh collected approximately 100,000 US-dollars via his homepage. The average contribution was the equivalent of about 10 US-dollars (*Hankyoreh*, 16.04.2002).

Considering this, it was not such a big surprise that Roh won the primaries in April, which were organized as an Internet election, interestingly enough. Once Roh Moo Hyun had become the candidate of his party, Nosamo and the *netizens* did everything in their power to protect him

⁸ http://newsmaker.khan.co.kr/politics_northkorea/n467109.htm

⁹ http://www.donga.com/docs/magazine/new_donga/200205/nd2002050110.html

against the unfair and even hysteric criticism coming from the dominant conservative newspapers.

The might of the *netizens* became clear once again when Chung Mong-Joon, the FIFA-Vice-President and son of the founder of the business conglomerate Hyundai, withdrew his support of Roh Moo Hyun on the eve of the election. Huge numbers of *netizens* immediately visited not only the homepages of Roh Moo Hyun and the MDP but also portal-sites like Yahoo or Daum (one of the largest Korean providers) as well as newspapers' homepages. On a normal day, Daum registered 2 or 3 millions visitors. However, on the eve of the presidential election, more than 5 million visitors were counted. Daum's server broke down due to all this activity (*Jungang Ilbo*, 21.12.2002).

A student reported that, within 20 minutes of Chung Mong-Joon's press conference, hundreds of messages appeared on the web-board of his university's homepage. Most of those messages offered ideas on how one could bring the young voters to participate in the presidential election. No doubt, this helped to mobilize young voters on the day of the presidential election on December 19, 2002 (*Hankook Ilbo*, 24.12.2002).

The "electoral revolution" (*Hankyoreh*, 24.12.2002), which nobody would have thought possible a year earlier, would not have come about without the Internet. For the first time an election was not decided by the strategies of party elites and the manipulation of public opinion by newspapers. Instead, voters who had gained a voice through the Internet decided it. With their electoral revolution the *netizens* transformed political culture in Korea. One newspaper even spoke of "net-crazy" (*Hankook Ilbo*, 24.12.2002).

One *netizen* wrote on Roh Moo Hyun's official web site: "We can be proud of ourselves. With respect to Internet and politics we are in the forefront of world development." That certainly is an exaggeration. Yet, for political scientists, the presidential election of 2002 ought to make an interesting case study into the realm of "Internet and democracy."

IV. CHANGES IN POLITICAL CULTURE

Seeing that the presidential election of 2002 remains a singular experience, it would be premature to expect the development of a new democracy in the sense of Benjamin Barber's "strong democracy" (1984), which includes a digitally mediated, active pluralism. Nevertheless, the Korean experience proved that online politics can positively influence the motivation and the participation of citizens. But the Korean experience further showed that a high-density Internet infrastructure cannot be considered a sufficient con-

dition for the political participation of a population, seeing that the broad and fast acceptance of the Internet in public opinion formation was also the result of some weaknesses in the political system and the dominant print media which did not or did not want to keep track of the differentiating changes in society and politics. Only under this set of conditions electronic communities formed themselves and then became politically active.

One could certainly say that the Korean experience proved that, in Siedschlag's (2002: 7) words, "the capacity of purposeful, strategic action within and outside the net" can exist in reality. What the Korean experience of 2002 does also show is that the relevance of another hypothesis of Siedschlag is greater than experts presumed, namely the existence of "structural possibilities to generate public forums within or through the Internet, and to establish wide channels of political communication." These public forums were not organized from above by political parties or the state, but – based on the Internet – from below in a spontaneous, voluntary, and self-organizing manner. It would not be right to claim, however, that the Internet as such had a democratic impact in Korea. It can just as easily be used for non-democratic purposes, for example the well-planned Park Chung Hee renaissance. The use of the Internet follows changing social and political circumstances but does not lead them (Siedschlag 2002: 5).

In Korea, democracy is still young and evolving. During the 2002 election many questions on the future development of Korean democracy arose. These questions had motivated the *netizens* to "new forms of grassroots democratic political activism" (Siedschlag, 2002: 2). In these efforts the Internet offered essential and effective support. In that sense, the potential of the Internet to further the development of democracy, be it in Korea or in other East Asian countries, is possibly quite large. In Korea, in any case, the Internet not only played an important role in Roh Moo Hyun's election success, but it has also led to significant changes in the political culture of the country. A good example is the disappearance of monetary and other rewards for people who had previously been carted in busloads to election meetings by political parties. These sorts of unfair and illegal practices of parties and their candidates have been severely restricted, because they were made public through the Internet immediately. In general, one could say that the scope for informational and monetary manipulation has become much more limited.

The campaigners of Roh Moo Hyun's support groups and of the third candidate, Kwon Young Gil, did not receive any financial compensation for their efforts. To the contrary, many have become paying members of the respective parties. In this sense, a new era in the organization of political parties was initiated. The new members want to participate in politi-

cal processes and while doing so they seek to exploit the possibilities offered by the Internet.

All this means that Korea is on its way to overcome some of the weaknesses of its young democracy. The citizens' demand for clean and transparent policy became stronger than ever. On this basis, the public prosecutor An Dae Hee has started to investigate the financial corruption of the political parties during the election campaign. The investigation is still ongoing, but the strong impact of this investigation is already remarkable. In this respect we can say, as Kim Jae Hong wrote in the *Financial Times* of October 29, 2003, that the transformation of Korean democracy toward more transparent and open politics began with the presidential election of 2002. This inspires some optimism for the future of Korean democracy.

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