

# **The Rise of Netizen Democracy A Case Study of Netizens' Impact on Democracy in South Korea**

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The history of democracy also shows that democracy is a moving target, not a static structure.

John Markoff

What does it mean to be politically engaged today? And what does it mean to be a citizen? The transformation of how we engage and act in society challenges how we perceive the concepts of civic engagement and citizenship, their content and expression. The introduction of new information technologies, most notably in the form of internet, has in turn reinvigorated these discussions.

Ylva Johansson

Someone may construe that in South Korea politics the major source of power moved from 'the muzzle of a gun (army)' to 'that of the emotion (TV)' and then to 'that of logic (Internet)' in a short time.

Yun Young-Min

## **Abstract**

South Korean netizens are exploring the potential of the internet to make an extension of democracy a reality. The cheering during the World Cup games in Korea in June 2002 organized by the Red Devils online fan club, then the protest against the deaths of two Korean school girls caused by U.S. soldiers were the prelude to the candidacy and election of Roh Moo Hyun, the first head of state whose election can be tracked directly to the activity of the netizens. This is a case study of the South Korean netizen democracy. This case study is intended as a contribution to a needed broader project to explore the impact netizens are having on extending democratic processes today.

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## **I – Preface**

In the early 1990s, a little more than two hundred years after the French Revolution, a new form of citizenship emerged. This is a citizenship not tied to a nation state or nation, but a citizenship that embodied the ability to participate in the decisions that govern one's society. This citizenship emerged on the internet and was given the title 'netizenship.' The individuals who practice this form of citizenship refer to themselves as 'netizens.'<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1990s, Michael Hauben, recognized the emergence and spread of this new identity. In the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, he describes how he came to recognize that not only was there a new technical development, the internet, but also,

there was a new identity being embraced by many of those online. Hauben writes:<sup>2</sup>

The story of Netizens is an important one. In conducting research five years ago (in 1992-1993-ed) online to determine people's uses of the global computer communications network, I became aware that there was a new social institution, an electronic commons developing.

It was exciting to explore this new social institution. Others online shared this excitement.... There are people online who actively contribute toward the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications. These are the people who discuss and debate topics in a constructive manner, who e-mail answers to people and provide help to new-comers, who maintain FAQ files and other public information repositories, who maintain mailing lists, and so on. These are people who discuss the nature and role of this new communications medium. These are the people who as citizens of the Net, I realized were Netizens.... (T)hey are the people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone's part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource.... The word citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership. The word Netizen reflects the new non-geographically based social membership. So I contracted net.citizen to Netizen.

Just as many different meanings have developed for 'citizen,' so 'netizen' has come to have several meanings. The early concept of 'netizen' is 'one who participates in the affairs of governing and making decisions about the internet and about how the internet can impact offline society.' A further development of this concept is 'one who is empowered by the net to have an impact on politics, journalism, culture and other aspects of society.'<sup>3</sup> This article will explore this new socio-political-cultural identity, the identity of the netizen in the context of recent developments in South Korea.

While there is a large body of literature about the internet and its impact on society, there has been considerably less attention paid to those who are empowered by the internet, to the netizens, who are able to assume a new role in society, and to embody a new identity. This article will explore how the netizens of South Korea are helping to shape the democratic practices that extend what we understand as democracy and citizenship. Their experience provides an important body of practice to consider when trying to understand what will be the future forms of political participation.

## II – Introduction

In his article "Where and When was Democracy Invented?," the sociologist John Markoff raises the question of the practice of democracy and more particularly of the times and places where innovations in democracy are pioneered.<sup>4</sup>

Markoff writes that a dictionary in 1690 defined democracy as a "form of government in which the people have all authority." (p. 661) Not satisfied with such a general definition, Markoff wants to have a more concrete definition or conception of democracy. He wants to investigate the practices that extend democracy. He proposes looking for models or practices that will help to define democracy in the future. Such models or practices, he cautions, may be different from what we currently recognize as democratic processes. "We need to consider," he writes, "the possibility that somewhere there may be still further innovations in what democracy is, innovations that will redefine it for the historians of the future." (p. 689)

Markoff suggests that researchers who want to understand the means of extending democracy

in the future not limit themselves to the “current centers of world wealth and power.” (p. 663) Similarly, he proposes that the poorest areas of the world will not be the most fruitful for researchers looking for innovations in democracy.

Considering Markoff’s guidelines, South Korea fits very appropriately with regard to the size and environment likely to innovate democratic practices. Events in South Korea confirm that indeed there are pioneering practices that can give researchers a glimpse into how democracy can be extended in a practical fashion.

### III – The South Korean Netizens Movement

Various factors have contributed to democratic developments in South Korea. For example, the activities of Korean non governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an important role. Similarly, the student movements at least since 1980 have served to maintain a set of social goals in the generations that have grown up with these experiences. Government support for the spread and use of computers and the internet by the South Korean population has also played a role.

For the purposes of this article, however, I want to focus on the practice of the Korean netizen. Along with the pioneering of computer networking in South Korea (1980s) and internet technology (1990s), there was the effort to maintain internet development for public purposes. This is different from how in the 1990s, for example, the U.S. government gave commercial and private interests free reign in their desires to direct internet development.

#### A – South Korean Networking as a Social Function

This case study begins in 1995.<sup>5</sup>

In 1995, the U.S. government privatized the U.S. portions of the internet backbone. The goal of the U.S. government was to promote private and commercial use. At the same time the concept of netizen was spreading around the U.S. and the international networking community, partially in opposition to the trend of privatization and commercialization.<sup>6</sup>

In South Korea, however, there was a commitment to “prevent commercial colonialization” of the South Korean internet. The effort was to promote the use of the internet for grassroots political and social purposes, as a means of democratizing Korea. In a paper presented in 1996, “The Grassroots Online Movement and Changes in Korean Civil Society,” Myung Koo Kang,<sup>7</sup> documents the netizen activity in South Korea to “intervene into the telecommunication policy of the government which is pushing toward privatization, and to build an agenda for non-market use of the electronic communications technology.”

Kang describes the formation of the Solidarity of Progressive Network Group (SPNG) in 1995. He wrote, “It is now estimated that the South Korean online community is populated by as many as 1.5 million users.” (p. 117) In the early 1990s, commercial networks like Chollian, Hitel, and Nowururi were main providers of internet access in South Korea. Those interested in developing the democratic potential of the internet were active in these networks in newsgroups devoted to specific topics or on internet mailing lists. Online communities developed and the experience was one that trained a generation in participatory online activity. Describing the experience of being online in one of these communities in the early 1990s, a netizen writing on Usenet explains:<sup>8</sup>

There were Hitel, Chollian, Nownuri, three major text based online services in Korea.

I think they boomed in early 90's and withered drastically as the Internet explosion occurred in mid and late 90's.

They provided the bbs, file up/download, chatting and community services.

Their community services were very strong. I also joined some such groups and learned a lot. Community members formed a kind of connection through casual meeting, online chatting, study groups and etc. The now influential Red Devils...was at first started as one of such communities. It introduced new forms of encounter among the people with the same interest.

They also had some discussion space, similar to this news group and people expressed their ideas....

## B – How the Net Spread

When the Asian economic crisis hit South Korea in 1997, the Korean government met the crisis partially with a commitment to develop the infrastructure for high speed access. It gave support for the creation of businesses to provide internet access and to provide training to use computers and the internet. Describing the program of the South Korean government, Kim, Moon and Yang write:<sup>9</sup>

It invested more than 0.25% of the GDP to build a high-speed backbone and is also providing more than 0.2% of GDP in soft loans to operators from 1999 to 2005.

Along with the financial and business investment, the government supported training programs in internet literacy. One such program was called the “Ten Million People Internet Education” project to provide computer and internet skills to 10 million people by 2002. Unemployed South Korean housewives were particularly targetted and reports indicate that 1 million were provided with courses as part of the 4.1 million people who participated in government initiated programs. Primary and secondary schools were also provided with high speed internet access. Internet cafes with high speed access called PC-bangs spread widely, offering another form of cheap internet access.<sup>10</sup>

## C – Netizen Events

Several developments in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demonstrate the impact the spread of the internet has had on South Korean society. A key result of widespread access to the internet in South Korea has been the emergence of the netizen and of examples of netizen democracy.

### 1) The Red Devils and World Cup Cheering

The Red Devils is a fan club for the South Korean national soccer team. It developed as an online community. The club became the main soccer cheering squad. Its original name had been “Great Hankuk Supporters Club” when it was created in 1997. It was renamed “Red Devils” after an online e-mail process “collecting public views thorough e-mail bulletins.”<sup>11</sup> The group utilized the internet for the 2002 World Cup cheering. Describing how the internet was utilized, Yong-Cho Ha and Sangbae Kim write:<sup>12</sup>

(T)he Web was a thrilling channel for many soccer fans across the country to satisfy their craving for information on the Cup. The 2002 World Cup provided Koreans with an opportunity to facilitate the dynamic exchange of information on the Web. In particular, the existence of the high-speed Internet encouraged the dynamic exchange of information about World Cup matches, players and rules. The Internet, which has become an essential part of everyday life for the majority of Koreans, helped raise public awareness about soccer and prompted millions of people to participate in outdoor cheering campaigns.

Major portal sites were flooded with postings on thousands of online bulletin boards. Online users scoured the Web to absorb detailed real-time match reports, player-by-player descriptions, disputes about poor officiating and other soccer information. Instant messenger also played a role in spreading real-time news and lively stories to millions of people. Korea has more than 10 million instant messenger users and many of them exchanged views and feelings about World Cup matches through the new Internet communications tool.

During the World Cup games held in June 2002, crowds of people gathered in the streets in South Korea, not only in Seoul. The Red Devils organized cheering and celebrating by 24 million people.<sup>13</sup> Sang-Jin Han describes how the Red Devils carefully planned for the massive cheering “through on-line discussions about the way of cheering, costumes, roosters’ songs and slogans, and so on.” The Red Devils function democratically and has online and off-line activities. “Anyone who loves soccer can be a member of the Red Devils,” Sang-Jin Han explains, by going to the website, logging on, and filling out their form. The website is (<http://reddevil.or.kr>) When the club started they had 200 members. During the world cup events, they had a membership of 200,000.<sup>14</sup>

The massive street celebrating during the soccer games has been compared in importance with the victory of the June 1987 defeat of the military government in South Korea.

To understand this assessment, it is helpful to look at an article written during the event by the Gwak Byuyng-chan, the culture editor of *Hankyoreh*, a South Korean newspaper. I will quote at length from this article as it provides a feeling for the unexpected but significant impact that the world cup event in 2002 had on Korean society. Gwak Byuyng-chan writes:<sup>15</sup>

To be honest with you, I was annoyed by the critics who compared the cheering street gatherings in front of the City Hall in June 2002 to the democratic uprising in June 1987. Much to my shame I criticized the foolish nature of sports nationalism...and even encouraged others to be wary of the sly character of commercialism.... However as time passed, I began to wonder whether I wasn’t being elitist and authoritarian.... I was blind to a changed environment and to a changed sensibility. I assumed that people were running around because of blind nationalism and commercialism.

However, this was not a group that was mobilized by anybody nor a group that anyone could mobilize.... On June 25, I wandered around Gwanghwamoon and in front of City Hall trying to get an understanding of the future leaders of this country. Otherwise, my clever brain told me, I would end up an old cynic confined to my own memories. After spending a long day wandering amongst young people, I finally understood. Although trying to understand their passion through this experience was like a Newtonian scientist trying to understand the theory of relativism, I understood. What we had experienced at that moment was the experience of becoming a ‘Great One.’ In a history with its ups and downs, we had more than our share of becoming this ‘Great One’ The 4.19 Revolution and 6.10 Struggle are two examples. So are the 4.3 Cheju Massacre and the 5.18 Democracy Movement. The gold collection drive during the IMF financial bailout was part of this effort too – trying to find a ray of hope in a cloud of despair....

The flood of supporters in June 2002, however, was no longer about finding hope. It was about young people dreaming dreams that soared higher and further than those of the past generations. Unlike the older generation, the younger generation is ready

to meet the world with open hearts. They have the imagination to reinvent it and the flexibility to come together and then separate as the occasion calls for it. The whole world was rapt with attention on 'Dae-han Min-gook (Great Korea)' not just because of our soccer ability but because of this young generations's passion and creativity. Does this mean that their dreams have come true? No. Does this mean that all this was nothing more than one summer night's feast? No. These dreams will continue to flourish and the responsibility for making sure that they do belongs to the older generation, which has had the experience of becoming a Great One through such events as the 6.10 or 4.19....

Not only did the cheering crowds joyously celebrate the Korean team victories in the World Cup events, they also helped clean the streets when the event was over. Another aspect of the Red Devils achievement was to remove the stigma attached to the color red. Previously, avoiding the color red was a form of anti-communism in South Korea. The Red Devils' organization of the street cheering is a demonstration of how communication among netizens that the internet makes possible had a significant impact on the whole of South Korean society as the celebration unfolded off-line.

Recognizing the importance of analyzing this experience to the people of Korea, a symposium was held on July 3, 2002 by the Korean Association of Sociological Theory shortly after the World Cup events.<sup>16</sup> The title of the symposium was "World Cup and New Community Culture." The theme was "Understanding and Interpreting the Dynamics of People (National People) Shown at the 2002 World Cup." Sang-jin Han described the dynamics of the culture that emerged from the World Cup events. Cho Han Hae-joang writes (p. 13):

What Han found during the collective gathering was a new community that possessed values of open-mindedness and diversity, of co-existence and respect for others.... Impressed by the cheering crowds, Han Sang-jin suggested looking for a point where the values of individualism and collectivism can synergize rather than collide. He wrote 'If there is a strong desire for individual self-expression and spontaneity blooming in the on-line space on one hand, there must be a strong sense of cohesion and desire for unity in the socio-cultural reality on the other. The new community culture will be equipped with the ability to harness these two forces into a symbiotic relationship.' In fact, at the symposium, many sociologists confessed to having been astounded at witnessing what they had considered to be impossible 'the coming together of the generations and the coexistence of the values of collectivism and individualism.'

Influenced by the joy of the World Cup experience, the committee of Munhwa Yondae (the Citizens' Network for Cultural Reform) organized a campaign. They sought to reclaim the streets for public purposes, and to designate July 1 as a holiday. Also they gave support to the campaign to establish a 5-day work week and one month holidays for Koreans.<sup>17</sup>

## 2) Candle-light Anti U.S. Demonstrations

On June 13, 2002, while the World Cup games were being held in South Korea and Japan, two 14 year old Korean school girls were hit and killed by a U.S. armored vehicle operated by two U.S. soldiers on a training exercise. Once the games were over, many of those who had been part of the soccer celebrating took part in protests over the deaths, demanding that those responsible be punished. In November, 2002, the two soldiers were tried by a U.S. military court on charges of negligent homicide. The verdict acquitting them was announced on November 19, 2002. Some

protests followed. Then on November 27, 2002, at 6 a.m., a netizen reporter with the logon name of Ang.Ma posted a message online on the *OhmyNews* website saying he would come out with a candle to protest the acquittal of the soldiers. On Saturday, November 30, four days later, there were evening rallies in 17 cities in South Korea including thousands of people participating in a candlelight protest in Seoul. They demanded a retrial of the soldiers and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. In subsequent weeks, candlelight demonstrations spread and grew in size. Protesters also demanded that the Status of Forces Agreement Treaty (SOFA) between the U.S. and South Korea be amended to give the Korean government more control over the activities of the U.S. troops in Korea.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of the “candlelight vigils that started from one netizen’s [online-ed] suggestion last month,” is described in a newspaper account:<sup>19</sup>

In Gwanghwamun, Seoul, the candles, lit one by one, form a sea. Tonight, on the 28<sup>th</sup>, without exception, the candles have gathered. About 1200 citizens gathered in the ‘Open Citizen’s Court’ beside the U.S. embassy in Gwanghwamun sway their bodies to the tunes of ‘Arirang’ which also played during the World Cup soccer matches last June. Middle-school student Kim Hee-yun says, ‘Every Saturday, I come here. There is something that attracts me to this place.’

Opposition to SOFA and to the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea continued to grow. The most well known outcome of this movement and the event most often cited as a result of the power of Korean netizens, is the election of Roh Moo-Hyun as President of South Korea on December 19, 2002.<sup>20</sup> The internet and netizens played a critical role in Roh’s election.

An article in a women’s newspaper on Dec 7, 2002, refers to the importance of netizens in South Korea:<sup>21</sup>

The netizens of the Korean Internet powerhouse are magnificent. They are reviving the youth culture of the Red Devils and the myth of the World Cup to create a social movement to revise SOFA.

### 3) Korean Netizens and the Election of President Roh

Of the candidates potentially running for the Presidency in South Korea in 2002, Roh Moo-Hyun had been considered the underdog and least likely to win. He had made a reputation for himself by his willingness to run for offices where he was unlikely to win, but where his candidacy might help to reduce regional antagonisms.<sup>22</sup> Another basis for Roh’s popularity was his campaign plank advocating citizen participation in government. Roh had opened an internet site in August 1999 and his site was one of the successful candidate websites at the time. In the April 2000 election, Roh ran for a seat to represent Pusan in the National Assembly as a means of continuing his struggle against regional hostilities.

Though he lost that election, thousands of people were drawn to Roh’s website and the discussions that followed the failed election effort. Through these online discussions, the idea was raised of starting an online fan club for Roh. The Nosamo Roho fan club was started by Jeong Ki Lee (User ID: Old Fox) on April 15, 2000.<sup>23</sup> Nosamo also transliterated as ‘Rohsamo,’ stands for ‘those who love Roh.’

The fan club had members both internationally and locally with online and offline activities organized among the participants. When Nosamo was created, a goal of the organization was a more participatory democracy. Sang-jin Han, reports that using the internet, the online newspaper *OhmyNews*, broadcast “live the inaugural meeting of the club held in Daejeon on June 6, 2000

through the Internet.”<sup>24</sup>

In Spring 2002, the Millennium Democracy Party (MDO) held the first primary election for the selection of a presidential candidate in the history of South Korea. Nosamo waged an active primary campaign. “In cyberspace, they sent out a lot of writings in favor of Roh and Rosamo to other sites and placed favorable articles on their home pages.” (p. 9) The internet activity of the fan club made it possible for Roh to win the MDP nomination. Nevertheless, he was still considered a long shot to win the Presidency.

Early in the 2002 campaign, the conservative press attacked Roh. In response, more and more of the public turned to the internet to discuss and consider the responses to these attacks. Analyzing how these attacks were successfully countered via online discussion and debate, Yun Young-Min writes, the “political influences” in discussion boards “comes from logic, and only logic can survive cyber-debate. This is one of the substantial changes that the internet has brought about in the realm of politics in South Korea.”<sup>25</sup> Also Yun documents that as the attacks increased, so did the number of visits recorded by Roh’s websites and other websites supporting the Roh candidacy. (pp. 148-149) In a table comparing visits to websites of the two main candidates, Yun documents a significantly greater number of visits to the Roh website and Roh related websites as opposed to the websites of his opposing candidate. (p. 151)

Along with the Roh websites, the online newspaper *OhmyNews* was helpful to the Roh candidacy. *OhmyNews* developed a form of participatory citizen journalism. The online newspaper helped Roh counter the criticism of the conservative press. Roh gave his first interview to *OhmyNews* after winning the presidency.

The night before the election, a main supporter of Roh, Chung Mong-joon who had formed a coalition with Roh for the election, withdrew his support. That night, netizens posted on various websites and conducted an online campaign to discuss what had happened and what Roh’s supporters had to do to repair the damage this late defection did to the campaign. An article in the *Korea Times*<sup>26</sup> describes how the online discussion helped to save Roh’s candidacy:

The free-for-all Internet campaign also helped Roh when he lost the support of Chung Mong-joon just a day before the poll. Unlike other conventional media such as newspapers and televisions, many Internet websites gave unbiased views on the political squabble between Roh and Chung, helping voters to form their reaction.... The Internet is now the liveliest forum for political debate in Korea, the world leader in broadband Internet patronized by sophisticated Internet users....

The *Korea Times* reporter describes the activity of netizens to get out the vote on election day in support of Roh:

As of 3 p.m. on voting day, the turnout stood at 54.3 percent, compared with 62.3 percent at the same time during the presidential election in 1997. Because a low turnout was considered likely fatal for Roh – the young often skip voting – many Internet users posted online messages to Internet chatting rooms, online communities and instant messaging services imploring their colleagues to get to the voting booth. The messages spread by the tens of thousands, playing a key role in Roh’s victory.<sup>27</sup>

During Roh’s election campaign, netizens turned to the internet to discuss and express their views, views which otherwise would have been buried. “The advent of the Internet can bring, by accumulating and reaching critical mass in cyberspace, a political result that anyone could hardly predict. No longer is public opinion the opinion of the press.... In fact the press lost authority by their criticisms,” Yun concludes.<sup>28</sup>



Because of the internet, Kim Yong-Ho observes, there is the “shift from party politics to citizen politics.”<sup>29</sup> The attitude of the two main candidates toward the internet proved to be a critical factor determining the outcome of the election. Roh’s main opponent approached the internet as a “new technology.” For Roh and his supporters, however, the internet became “an instrument to change the framework and practice of politics.” (p. 235) “Certainly, politics in Korea is no longer a monopoly of parties and politicians,” conclude Yong-Cho Ha and Sangbae Kim.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4) High School Students Protest Hair Length Restrictions

An example of how the younger generation in South Korea found the internet helpful was the struggle of high school students to oppose hair length restrictions set by the government and enforced by their schools. Teachers in some South Korean schools cut the hair of students who have hair longer than the school regulations permit. Such mandatory hair cutting, students explained, was not only humiliating, but also can leave them with a hair cut that is unseemly. Considering the many pressures that high school students in South Korea are under, an editorial in the *Korea Times*,<sup>31</sup> explains:

Most egregious of all are their hairstyles – buzz cuts for boys and bob cuts or ponytails for girls.... At some schools, teachers still make narrow, bushy expressways on the crowns of boys’ heads with hair clippers, and lay bare girls’ ears with scissors. They say these are for the proper guidance of students by preventing them from frequenting adult-only places and focusing on only studies. But this is nothing but violence and abuse.

High school students opposed these restrictions and practices with a website to discuss the problem and how to organize their protests. Over 70,000 people signed an online petition protesting the hair length restrictions and practices. Also there were demonstrations organized online against these practices. The demonstrations were met with a significant show of force by police and from high school teachers.

#### 5) Government Online Forums

Netizen activities in South Korea had an effect on official government structures. Government officials are under pressure to utilize the forms that are being developed online. For example, the online website for the President of Korea had a netizen section. Netizens could log on and post their problems and complaints. These could then be viewed by anyone else who logged onto the website. The open forum section of the website was left relatively free of government restrictions or interference for a while.

Uhm and Haugue<sup>32</sup> provide a description of the participatory sections of the President’s website. They write:

Behind the outwardly chaotic Open Forum of the BBS on the Presidential Website, a team works quietly, browsing all the messages received through the BBS and other channels for user participation, and sorting them in terms of the need for specific attention and governmental follow-up. One of the main jobs the team conducts is to transfer each of the messages to the relevant section of the Presidential Office, or to the ministry in charge of the policy area concerned. The other main job is to make a daily report to the President, based on the issues not necessarily ripe for media attention but showing signs of potential that could push the government into difficulties. These interactive channels function as a dynamic store of political issues,

spanning the gamut of societal interests, ranging from key policy issues like the amendment of education acts to essentially private matters like a boundary dispute between neighbors.

Korean government ministries similarly had websites where anyone could post a message, “even anonymously, and share them with others.” (p. 28) These websites were offered as a place where “all public opinion” can be expressed. (p. 28)

Posting to an official site is not necessarily without concern about retaliation, however. Recently, a high school student reported:

We have no channel to convey our opinions to the education authorities. If we post a petition to a Web site of a provincial education office, the message is delivered to our school and teachers give us a hard time because of it.<sup>33</sup>

There are other events which demonstrate the power of the net and the netizen in contemporary Korean politics. For example, there was the Defeat Campaign for the April 2000 election. NGO's used the internet to wage a protest against the reelection of a number of politicians they proposed were too corrupt or incompetent to continue in office. They called this a blacklist. Several of the politicians they opposed did not get reelected.

Rather than gathering further examples, however, there is the challenge to understand the nature of the practice to extend democracy that has emerged in South Korea.

## D – The Netizen and Netizen Democracy in South Korea

One aspect identified as important for netizen democratic activity is that the netizen participation is directed toward the broader interests of the community. Byoungkwan Lee writes:<sup>34</sup>

People who use the Internet for certain purpose are called ‘Netizens’ and they may be classified in various groups according to the purpose that they pursue on the Internet. While some people simply seek specific information they need, others build their own community and play an active part in the Internet for the interest of that community. (Michael-ed) Hauben (1997) defined the term Netizen as the people who actively contribute online towards the development of the Internet.... In particular, Usenet news groups or Internet bulletin boards are considered an ‘agora’ where the Netizens actively discuss and debate upon various issues.... In this manner, a variety of agenda are formed on the ‘agora’ and in their activity there, a Netizen can act as ‘a citizen who uses the Internet as a way of participating in political society’....

Another component of democratic practice is to participate in discussion and debate. Discussing an issue with others who have a variety of views is a process that can help one to think through an issue and develop a thoughtful and common understanding of a problem. The interactive nature of the online experience allows for a give and take that helps netizens dynamically develop or change their opinions and ideas. Several Korean researchers describe the benefit of online discussion. For example, Jongwoo Han writes:<sup>35</sup>

Another aspect of online is that participating in a discussion with others with a variety of viewpoints makes it possible to develop a broader and more all sided understanding of issues.

Jinbong Choi, offers a similar observation:<sup>36</sup>

By showing various perspectives of an issue the public can have a chance to acquire more information and understand the issue more deeply.

Byoungkwan Lee observes how the net provides “a public space where people have the

opportunity to express their own opinions and debate on a certain issue.”<sup>37</sup> Comparing the experience online with the passive experience of the user of other media, Lee notes, “Further the role of the internet as a public space seems to be more dynamic and practical than that of traditional media such as television, newspapers, and magazines because of its own distinct characteristics, namely, interactivity.” (pp. 58-59)

An important function of the internet is to facilitate netizens’ thinking about and considering public issues and questions. Byoungkwan Lee explains some of how this occurs:

Various opinions about public issues, for instance, are posted on the Internet bulletin boards or the Usenet newsgroups by Netizens, and the opinions then form an agenda in which other Netizens can perceive the salient issues. As such it is assumed that not only does the Internet function as the public space, but it can also function as a medium for forming Internet users’ opinions.<sup>38</sup>

Through their discussion and participation, netizens are able to have an impact on public affairs. Hyug Baeg Im argues that the internet even makes it possible for Korean netizens to provide a check on government activity:<sup>39</sup>

(The – ed ) Internet can deliver more and diverse information to citizens faster in speed and cheaper in cost, disclose information about politicians in cyber space that works 24 hours, transmit quickly the demands of people to their representatives through two-way cyber communication, and enable politicians to respond to people’s demands in their policy making and legislations in a speedy manner. In addition, netizens can make use of Internet as collective action place of monitoring, pressuring and protesting that works 24 hours and can establish the system of constant political accountability.

The impact the internet is having on the younger generations of Korean society has impressed several researchers. For example, Jongwoo Han observes that younger netizens are more quickly able to participate in political affairs than was previously possible. Jongwoo Han writes:<sup>40</sup>

Due to its effectiveness as a communications channel, the Internet shortens the time in which social issues become part of the national agenda, especially among populations previously excluded from the national discourse. The time needed for one generation to learn from the previous one is also shortened. In newly created Internet cyberspace, the young generation, which did not use to factor in major social and political discourses in Korean society, is becoming a major player. The political orientation of the offline 386 generation was smoothly handed on to the 2030 apolitical young generation through the 2002 World Cup and candle light anti-U.S. demonstrations.

(Note: The 386 generation refers to those who were university students in the 1980s. Also they were the first generation of Korean students who had access to computers for their personal use. The 2030 generation refers to students currently in their 20's and 30's and who have grown up with the internet.)

Jongwoo Han argues that online discussion has brought a needed development in Korean democracy. All can participate and communicate (pp. 16-17):

Due to the revolutionary development of information technology, the transition of power from one generation to the next will accelerate, thus maximizing the dynamics of changes in political systems. The duration of the overall learning and education process between generations will also be shortened. Especially, the Netizen

transcends the boundaries of age, job, gender and education as long as participants share individual inclinations on topics.

Explaining how the participatory process works, Kim, Moon, and Yang provide an example from Nosamo's experience:<sup>41</sup>

Their internal discussion making process was a microcosm of participatory democracy in practice. All members voted on a decision following open deliberations in forums for a given period of time. Opinions were offered in this process in order to effect changes to the decision on which people were to vote.

Such online discussion and decision making was demonstrated when members of Roh's fan club disagreed with his decision to send South Korean troops to Iraq in support of the U.S. invasion. Even though they were members of a fan club, they did not feel obligated to support every action of the Roh Presidency.<sup>42</sup> The fan club members held an online discussion and vote on their website about the U.S. war in Iraq. They issued a public statement opposing the decision to send South Korean troops to Iraq.

Several researchers are endeavoring to investigate the netizens phenomenon and the conscious identity that is being developed. They believe that the internet is providing an important way to train future citizens. For example, Sang-jin Han writes:<sup>43</sup>

I argue that a post-traditional and hence post-Confusian attitude is emerging quite visible particularly among younger generations who use the Internet, not simply as an instrument of self-interest, but as a public sphere where netizens freely meet and discuss matters critically.

In his research, Sang-Jin Han is interested in the impact the internet is having on the democratic development of South Korean society. He argues that the online experience provides an alternative experience to the authoritarian and hierarchical institutions and practices that are prevalent in society offline. The online experience in itself is a form of a laboratory for democracy. In the process of participating in the democratic processes online, a new identity is forged. One begins to experience the identity of oneself as a participant, not observer. Contributions online are appreciated or the subject of controversy. This is a different world than the one the ordinary person experiences offline and one that is a more dynamic and creative experience. Sang-Jin Han refers to research by Sunny Yoon about the impact of the internet on South Korean youth. Yoon writes:<sup>44</sup>

In short, the Korean new generation experiences an alternative identity in cyberspace that they have never achieved in real life. The hierarchical system of ordinary social reality turns up side down as soon as Korean students enter cyberspace. In interviews, most students claim that the Internet opened a new world and new excitement. This is not only because the Internet has exciting information, but also because it provides them with a new experience and an alternative hierarchical. It is something of an experience of deconstructing power in reality, especially in Korean society, which is strongly hierarchical and repressive for young students.

#### IV – Conclusion

In this case study I have explored several aspects of the online experience that generally are given little attention. South Korean netizens utilize the internet forums to let each other know of a problem or event, to discuss problems and to explore how to find solutions. This form of activity is a critical part of a democratic process. It involves the participant not in carrying out someone else's solution to a problem, but in the effort to frame the nature of the problem and to understand its

essence.

The internet doesn't require that one belong to a particular institution. A netizen can express his or her opinion, gather the facts that are available, and hear and discuss the facts gathered and opinions offered by others. Not only is the internet a laboratory for democracy, but the scale of participation and contributions is unprecedented. Online discussion makes it possible for netizens to become active individual and group actors in social and public affairs. The internet makes it possible for netizens to speak out independently of institutions or officials.

The netizen is able to participate in an experience that reminds one of the role that the citizen of ancient Athens or the citizen just after the French Revolution could play in society. The experience of such participation is a training ground in which people learn the skills and challenges through the process. Considering the potential of the internet, the Swedish researcher Ylva Johansson refers to the potential of technology as contributing to political participation and the concept of citizenship on a higher societal level.<sup>45</sup>

Describing this important benefit of being online, Hauben writes:<sup>46</sup>

For the people of the world, the Net provides a powerful means for peaceful assembly. Peaceful assembly allows people to take control of their lives, rather than that control being in the hands of others.

This case study of Korean netizens provides a beginning investigation into the impact that widespread broadband access can bring to society.<sup>47</sup> The practices of South Korean netizens to extend democracy is prologue to the changes that netizenship can bring to the world, to the rise of netizen democracy as a qualitative advance over the former concept of the citizen and democracy.

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## Appendix A

### The Early Development of Computer Networking in Korea

South Korea's first networking system was the connection of two computers on May 15, 1982, one at the Department of Computer Science, at Seoul National University and the other to a computer at the Korean Institute of Electronics Technology (KIET) in Gumi (presently ETRI) via a 1200 bps leased line. In January 1983, a computer at KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) connected to the other two computers. These three computers at different networking sites used TCP/IP to connect. This is the communication protocol which makes it possible to have an internet. This early Korean computer network was called System Development Network (SDN).\*

In August 1983, the Korean SND was connected to the mcvox computer in the Netherlands using the Unix networking program UUCP (Unix-to-Unix Copy). And in October 1983 the Korean network was connected to a site in the U.S. (HP Labs).

A more formal connection to the U.S. government sponsored network CSNET was made in December 1984. In 1990, the Korean network joined the U.S. part of the internet.

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\* See "A Brief History of the Korean Internet," 4.1.05

[http://www.internethistory.or.kr/breifhistory/ebrief-history\(eng\).htm](http://www.internethistory.or.kr/breifhistory/ebrief-history(eng).htm)

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### Notes:

1. See for example, Michael Hauben, Preface, in Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, IEEE Computer Society Press, 1997, p. ix.

2. Ibid., Chapter 1, p. 3.

3. This is a concept that Michael Hauben developed in an article "What the Net Means to Me," online at: [http://www.ais.org/~hauben/Michael\\_Hauben/Collected\\_Works/Amateur\\_Computerist/What\\_the\\_Net\\_Means\\_to\\_Me.txt](http://www.ais.org/~hauben/Michael_Hauben/Collected_Works/Amateur_Computerist/What_the_Net_Means_to_Me.txt)

4. "Where and When was Democracy Invented," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41(4), 1999, pp. 660-690.

Online at: [http://pics3441.upmf-grenoble.fr/articles/demo/where\\_and\\_when\\_was\\_democracy\\_invented.pdf](http://pics3441.upmf-grenoble.fr/articles/demo/where_and_when_was_democracy_invented.pdf)

5. A significant caveat about this case study is that computer networking and the internet were developed relatively early in South Korea. (See Appendix A) The country is a showplace for the spread of broadband internet access to a large percentage of the population. A study of the spread of the internet in South Korea is a study of an advanced situation which allows one to see into the future. This study raises the question of whether knowledge of the practices of the South Korean netizen movement can help to extend democracy elsewhere around the world.

6. Ibid., note 1, Chapter 12, pp. 214-221.

7. Myung Koo Kang, "The Grassroots Online Movement and Changes in Korean Civil Society," *Review of Media, Information and Society* 3, 1998, pp. 107-127.

8. Jongseon Shin, soc.culture.korea, April 10, 2005. Online at:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!original/soc.culture.korean/gbZORadACPQ/IxrUYb7FuE8J>

9. Heekyung Hellen Kim, Jae Yun Moon and Shinkyu Yang, "Broadband Penetration and Participatory Politics: South Korea Case," *Proceedings of the 37<sup>th</sup> Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2004, p. 4.

10. Ibid., p. 5.

11. Sang-Jin Han, "Confucian Tradition and the Young Generation in Korea: The Effect of Post-Traditional Global Testing," *International Symposium Dialogue among Youth in East Asia Project*, Yingjie Exchange Center of Peking University, delivered January 14, 2004.

12. Yong-Cho Ha and Sangbae Kim, "The Internet Revolution and Korea: A socio-cultural interpretation," *International Conference on Re-Bootting the Miracle? Asia and the Internet Revolution in the Age of International Indeterminacy*, Seoul, South Korea, December 4, 2002. Online at: <http://www.sangkim.net/it&korea.pdf>

13. See Hyug Baeg Im, *From Democratic Consolidation and Democratic Governance: 21<sup>st</sup> Century South Korean Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, p. 28.

14. Ibid., note 11, p. 10.

15. Translated and quoted in Hae-joang Cho Han, "Beyond the FIFA World Cup: An Ethnography of the 'Local' in South Korea around the 2002 World Cup," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004, p. 11.

16. Ibid., p. 5.

17. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

18. See *Korea Times* articles: Na Jeong-ju, "Anti-U.S. Protests Held Nationwide Over Acquittals of GIs," *Korea Times*, November 27, 2002 and Na Jeong-ju, "Entertainers, Priests Join Anti-U.S. Protests," *Korea Times* December 3, 2002

19. Ibid., note 15, p. 22.

20. Kim Hyong-eok, "The Two Koreas: A Chance to Revive," *Korea Times*, December 27, 2002. This article in the *Korea Times* attributes Roh's election to the euphoria generated by the World Cup Soccer Games, the hostility to the U.S. generated by the deaths of the two Korean school girls and the inadequacy of the U.S. response.

21. Ibid., note 15, p. 14.

22. Yun Young-Min, "An Analysis of Cyber-Electioneering Focusing on the 2002 Presidential Election in Korea," *Korea Journal*, Autumn 2003, pp. 141-164.

23. Jongwoo Han, "Internet, Social Capital, and Democracy in the Information Age: Korea's Defeat Movement, the Red Devils, Candle Light Anti-U.S. Demonstration, and Presidential Election during 2000-2002," p. 15, no longer online. See also, Han Jongwoo, *Networked Information Technologies, Elections, and Politics: Korea and the United States*, Lanham, Md, Lexington Books, 2012, p. 85.

24. Ibid., note 11, p. 8.

25. Ibid., note 22, p. 157.

26. Kim Deok-hyun, "Roh's Online Supporters Behind Victory," *Korea Times*, December 23, 2002.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., note 22, p. 143.

29. Kim Yong-Ho, "Political Significance of the 2002 Presidential Election Outcome and Political Prospects for the Roh Administration," *Korea Journal*, Vol. 43, No.2, 2003, p. 233.

30. Yong-Chool Ha and Sangbae Kim, "The Internet Revolution and Korea: A Socio-cultural Interpretation," Paper delivered Dec 4, 2005 at the conference *Re-Bootting the Miracle? Asia and the Internet Revolution in the Age of International Indeterminacy*, Seoul, South Korea, December 4-5, 2005, p. 8.

31. "No Forced Haircut, Please," *Korea Times*, May 5, 2005.

32. Seung-Yong Uhm and Rod Hague, "Electronic Governance, Political Participation and Virtual Community: Korea and U.K. Compared in Political Context," paper presented at *European Consortium for Political Research, Joint Workshops*, Workshop on "Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation, Organisation and Participation via new ICTs," Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Grenoble, France, 6-11 April 2001, p. 24.

33. Bae Keun-min, "High School Students Stand Up for Rights," *Korea Times*, May 10, 2005.
34. Byoungkwan Lee, Karen M. Lancendorfer and Ki Jung Lee, "Agenda-Setting and the Internet: the Intermedia Influence of Internet Bulletin Boards on Newspaper Coverage of the 2000 General Election in South Korea," *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 15, No 1, 2005, p. 58.
35. Ibid., note 23, 17.
36. Jinbong Choi, "Public Journalism in Cyberspace: A Korean Case Study," *Global Media Journal*, Vol. 2, No 3, 2003, p.27. Online at: <http://lass.purduecal.edu/cca/gmj/fa03/graduatefa03/gmj-fa03-choi.htm>.
37. Ibid., note 34, pp. 58-59.
38. Ibid.
39. Hyug Baeg Im, "Democratic Consolidation and Democratic Governance: 21<sup>st</sup> Century South Korean Democracy in Comparative Perspective," *Sixth Forum on Reinventing Government*, Seoul, South Korea, May 24-27, 2005.
40. Ibid., note 23, p. 4.
41. Ibid., note 9.
42. An article in the *Korea Times* on March 24, 2003, quotes a member of the fan club: "When we say we love Roh Moo-hyun, we do not mean Roh is always right. We simply mean that we love his ideas for new politics and a democracy in which the people are the real owners of the country." Byun Duk-kun, "'Nosamo' Opposes Assistance to Iraq War."
43. Ibid., note 11, p. 4.
44. Sunny Yoon, "Internet Discourse and the Habitus of Korea's New Generation," *Culture, Technology, Communication*, edited by Charles Ess with Fay Sudweeks, State University of New York, 2001, p. 255.
45. Ylva Johansson, "Civic Engagement in Change – The Role of the Internet," *European Consortium for Political Research*, Edinburgh, U.K., 2003.
46. Ibid., note 1, see for example Chapter 18, "The Computer as a Democratizer," pp. 315- 320.
47. Hauben quotes Steve Welch who recognized the importance of all having access ( Ibid., p. 27): "If we can get to the point where anyone who gets out of high school has used computers to communicate on the Net or a reasonable facsimile or successor to it, then we as a society will benefit in ways not currently understandable. When access to information is as ubiquitous as access to the phone system, all Hell will break loose. Bet on it."

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