

A Look at the Changes in Debate Structure in Korea through the Candlelight Vigils

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Abstract

The massive expansion of the 2008 BSE candlelight vigils confirmed a changed structure of public debate in Korea by “coalitions of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations.” Korea’s progressive media, intellectuals, civic groups, citizens, and political parties succeeded in determining the direction of public opinion and power in a vacuum created by collapsed public authority to a considerable extent. At the same time, system of determining the truth in Korean society was being seriously shaken. Though the possibility for an authoritarian regime to re-emerge in Korea has gone since its democratization, the authority of public agencies needed for debate and dialogue is being shaken. Ideological freedom is open to all possibilities, but public authority involving man’s daily necessities and life must make realistic conclusions. In order for disputes to become means of the pursuit of truth, an authority recognized by all parties of a debate is absolutely needed. By delving into the core problems of the candlelight vigils, this paper will identify the origins of the BSE candlelight vigils and the process by which the authority of Korea’s public agencies was damaged and collapsed. It will also reveal the distortions of Korea’s BSE experts’ analyses of the situation, and that these distortions were made possible by the support of “coalitions of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations.”

Keywords: U.S.-South Korea beef dispute, candlelight demonstration in South Korea, democracy and authority, political paranoia, social structure of argumentation

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Introduction

In any society, identifying the facts of a conflict has a major bearing on its resolution. The need for determining facts arises incessantly, whether in the judicial process of contemplating a suspect's innocence or guilt but also in all affairs of daily life. This necessary process of discerning fact from mere speculation is entrusted to expert organizations that make decisions independent of political beliefs. If no social consensus can be established as the outcome of fact determination in nonpolitical affairs, however, conflicts arise. This resembles disrupted social unity due to unnecessary conflicts arising from a lack of unity in methods of judgment and measurement. Judgment of the facts regarding the safety of food and drugs, accordingly, may sometimes contain very important political implications. Hence, most countries grant special authority to public agencies to make judgments on related matters of importance. "Special authority" in this context may be interpreted as "the right and duty to make the final judgment." In Korea, for example, the Korean Food and Drug Administration makes the final judgment on issues of food and drug safety.

Various assumptions have been made about what caused the 2008 mad cow disease candlelight vigils in Korea.¹ There is no dispute that the public protests were stimulated by an episode of Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)'s *PD Notebook*, entitled "American Beef: Is It Really Free of Mad Cow Disease?" The contents of the program were so shocking that it was all but impossible for

1. Some cited public grievances in the Lee Myung-bak administration, two months in power and four months with the functioning of the presidential transition commission included, as the psychological background of the candlelight vigils. Motives of participating in the protests, unprecedentedly large in scale and long in length, could be diverse. But their major cause was clearly a belief that "American beef is dangerous." That can be verified by the fact that the protests abruptly lost their drive when the import of over-thirty-month beef was banned as a result of an additional negotiation with the United States as well as the analysis of a public poll conducted by the Graduate School of Health, Medical College, Seoul National University.

viewers to trust the safety of American bovine meat products and, in result, get upset about the conclusion of the Korea-U.S. beef negotiation.

The question is: why Koreans harbor such extreme fears of American beef despite the fact that public agencies at home and abroad as well as the World Organization for Animal Health (Office International des Epizooties; OIE) recognized the safety of American beef? To begin, it is necessary to first confirm three facts. First, the authority granted to Korea, the United States, and international agencies disappeared in Korea during the protests. Second, Korea's pertinent public agencies abruptly shifted their views on the safety of American beef when power was transferred from the Roh Moo-hyun administration to the Lee Myung-bak administration. Third, the government did not endeavor to conduct risk communication with the public.

Although the Lee administration cannot avoid criticism for neglecting risk communication with citizens about the safety of America's bovine meat products, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the authority of public agencies collapsed. As a matter of fact, experts from government agencies attempted to conduct risk communication through press conferences as soon as the candlelight vigils began but to no avail. Since equivocations by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries constituted the main cause of the collapsed public authority, the principal cause of the 2008 candlelight vigils was that the people did not accept the views and explications offered by both domestic and international public agencies. To fully understand the causes and significance of the protests, the question of why public authority collapsed in Korea must be answered.

This paper, by delving into the core problems of the candlelight vigils, will reveal the emergence of a new structure of public debate in Korean society, dubbed "the coalition of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations." This debate infrastructure may be classified as a feedback structure whereby the key players of each constituent body of the coalition mutually quote and support each other along rigid ideological lines when dealing with potentially explosive issues. Backed by this very coalition, a

small number of natural scientists worthy of being called private authorities were able to emphasize the danger of American beef and eventually challenge the authority of public agencies at home and abroad. Consequently, a position was established that the safety issues of American bovine meat products must be determined through debates between public and private authorities. In fact, the Korean public agencies responsible for the safety of food proposed conclusive debates and TV networks consequently held a large number of debates on American beef. But there were only a few people who noticed that this situation of placing public authorities, who should rightfully make final decisions on food safety issues, on equal footing with private authorities was abnormal and that this was irrelevant to the freedom of thought guaranteed by liberal, democratic society.

The equalized authority of public and private entities inevitably raises the question of which party is correct. This question must surely be dealt with by bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) experts. But therein lies another question, similar in content but of an entirely different dimension: “which side of the assertions made by public and private authorities must the general public trust?” In principle, experts and laymen alike should be able to answer this question. Both public and private authorities attempted to persuade the public that their stance on the safety of American beef was correct based on the premise that the subjects of persuasion, the general public, are capable of making their own judgments. No doubt, trust is a subjective phenomenon, but there is no reason whatsoever for the reasons of trust to be subjective. Even though the general public’s trust of public authority has plummeted, I accept the assertions of public authorities as correct. This is not only because of the social role of public authorities and their responsibility to make final decisions, but also because a considerable portion of the claims that Korea’s BSE export groups² advanced were clearly false or distorted.

2. Questions have long been raised as to whether those natural scientists and health personnel who strongly asserted the danger of American beef were actually BSE

This thesis will identify the origins of the BSE candlelight vigils and the process by which the authority of Korea's public agencies was damaged and collapsed. It will also reveal the distortions of Korea's BSE experts' analyses of the situation, and that these distortions were made possible by the support of "coalitions of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations."

Origins of BSE Controversy in Korea³

The Democratic Labor Party held an event, the "Struggle against the Import of BSE-Contaminated Meat Products," in front of the National Assembly in November 2006. Seen in the background were placards reading, "Suspend Import of BSE-Contaminated Meat! Suspend the Korea-U.S. FTA Negotiation!" and "Suspend the Korea-U.S. FTA Negotiation! Hold a Plebiscite!" Shown in the front was a placard reading, "Must We Citizens Eat BSE-Contaminated Meat Products Risking Our Lives?"⁴ The aforementioned MBC's *PD Notebook* program was aired on April 28, 2008. Written behind the host was this subtitle: "Must We Eat BSE-contaminated Beef Risking Our Lives?" with a photo of a group of cows shown.

experts. They are called "experts" in this paper for the sake of convenience in a bid to save discussion.

3. This is a summary of the author's paper, titled "The Process of the Mad Cow Disease Affair in Korea," delivered at the International BSE Symposium held in November 2008 under the auspices of the Korea Veterinary Science Society and Zeitgeist, an incorporated body, with BSE experts from Britain, the United States, Japan, and Korea attending.
4. "The Decade We've Shared with the People, The Hall Commemorating the Tenth Anniversary of the Democratic Labor Party" (the special page marking the tenth anniversary of the Democratic Labor Party), <http://www.kdlp.org/10th/index.html> (accessed June 14, 2010). The DLP inaugurated the National BSE Monitoring Group in June 2006.



Figure 1. Photo of Struggle against the Import of BSE-Contaminated Meat Products

Figure 2. Photo of MBC's PD Notebook Program



The assembly slogans of the Democratic Labor Party and the background subtitle of the *PD Notebook* program, identical in effect, suggest three things. First, given that the DLP meeting was held under the Roh Moo-hyun administration, responsibility for the controversy over the safety of American bovine meat products cannot be attributed to the Lee Myung-bak administration alone. Second, whether American beef is safe is an issue of natural science, while pros and cons of the Korea-U.S. FTA are a matter of policy decisions; the two issues differ from each other in nature. However, they remain closely linked with each other in terms of Korean political dynamics.⁵ Third is the fact that the groups that asserted American beef to be “dangerous stuff one has to eat risking one’s life” came into existence as

5. Constituting the main force of the National Mad Cow Disease Monitoring Group is the Pan-national Struggle Headquarters Blocking the Korea-U.S. FTA. “National Mad Cow Disease Monitoring Group Inaugurated in a Ceremony,” *Hankyoreh*, June 12, 2006, <http://hani.co.kr/arti/society/ngo/215427.html> (accessed June 2, 2010). Also refer to <http://www.nofta.or.kr>. At its inaugural ceremony on June 14, 2006, the pan-national struggle headquarters hoisted a slogan reading, “Immediately Suspend the Korea-U.S. FTA Forcing BSE, the God of Death.” This organization participated in the candlelight vigils since May 2008 in a systematic manner.

early as 2006. Then why was the Korea-U.S. meat negotiation linked with their FTA negotiation, and why was American meat treated much like toxic chemicals?

The news in December 2003 that BSE-infected cows were discovered in the United States, a country known to be exempt from the disease, gave Korea a great shock. Many countries, Korea and Japan included, immediately suspended the import of American beef. The government banned the sales of spinal bones and intestines, which were already in circulation. Such developments prompted people to hold the perception that “American beef can be dangerous, and bones and intestines in particular.” Media outlets, both conservative



Figure 3. Banner pictured on website of the Pan-national Struggle Headquarters Blocking the Korea-U.S. FTA

and progressive, showed a reaction of principle, supporting the import bans by the government and calling for appropriate further steps. But the situation had begun to calm down with the disclosure that cases of U.S. BSE occurred in cows imported from Canada.

A piece of news reached Korea that BSE-suspected cows reappeared in the United States when Korea was reportedly ready to agree to import American beef at the third experts' meeting in June 2005. President Roh Moo-hyun, on visit to the United States at the time, promised to “resolve the issue of resuming the import of American beef immediately upon return home.”⁶ The commitment coincided with the initial efforts of the two governments to conduct an FTA negotiation.⁷ Negative editorials about and expert con-

6. “Meat Import Not Subject to Negotiation,” *Hankyoreh*, June 24, 2005.

7. “Korea-U.S. FTA Pressured by Korean and U.S. Business Circles and U.S. Administration, Alleges Roh Hoe-chan,” *Newscham*, July 13, 2006, <http://www.newscham.net>.

tributions to the import of American beef began to increase in the progressive media, while articles involving BSE decreased gradually in the conservative media.

When Korea proposed the FTA negotiation, the United States proposed four preconditions in October 2005, including the resolution of the beef issue. The Korean government's acceptance of these demands rapidly attributed political meaning and dynamics to the issue of American beef import and food safety. The Roh Moo-hyun administration intended to use American beef import as a lever for gaining U.S. Congressional ratification of an FTA with Korea. As a result, the Korean government failed to conduct risk communication by making public the scientific risk assessment involved. Once the Korean government confirmed the safety of American beef, it would have to resume the import of American beef, unrelated in form to the conclusion of an FTA with the United States. In other words, the Roh Moo-hyun administration's FTA strategy rendered it totally impossible for it to carry out the risk communication involved. Under such circumstances, Korean opponents to an FTA with the United States figured that disrupting the American beef import negotiation would stymie the FTA negotiation.⁸

Japan, within two years after suspending the import in December 2005, agreed with the United States to import only lean meat of under-twenty-month cattle with specialized risk materials removed. Korea also decided to resume importing boneless meat of under-thirty-month cattle from early April 2006. With backbone classified as specialized risk material uncovered on January 20, 2006, however,⁹ the Japanese government again totally suspended the import of American beef. The incident reinforced the impression among Koreans that "American beef is not only dangerous to eat but also BSE

8. "BSE-infected Cattle Negotiation,' Korea-U.S. FTA and 'Human BSE,'" May 2, 2008. The author of this article claimed, "If Asked What Korea-U.S. FTA Is Like, Answer 'Look at a Mad Cow,'" http://www.jabo.co.kr/sub_read.html?uid=23963§ion=sc22§ion2 (accessed June 22, 2010).

9. "Japan Again Suspends U.S. Beef Import in a Month after Import Resumption with Suspected BSE Material Detected," *Hankyoreh*, January 21, 2006.

pathogens are condensed in bones.” In or around the first half of 2006, the progressive media began to carry a flood of definitive contributions by self-professed experts on the safety of American beef. Wu Seok-kyun, policy bureau director of the Korean Federation of Medical Group for Human Rights,¹⁰ an opponent of a Korea-U.S. FTA, made the following claim:

WHO advises that the cow be returned into an herbivorous animal. But OIE rejects it. Why? Because it hurts the enormous livestock capital of the United States. OIE's other regulations are not accurate, either. Calves are safe? It takes four to five years for BSE cows to show the symptoms. If a thirty-month-old cow is slaughtered, there is no way of knowing if it is infected with BSE, even if it is in the United States where no BSE inspection is conducted. Lean meat is alright? A thesis claiming that prions, causing BSE, were uncovered in the “muscle” of a man infected by BSE, has been published in a most authoritative medical journal of the United States.¹¹

Several Korean natural scientists in their contributions started to make an attempt to crumble public authority by blaming public agencies defending the safety of American beef based on what they termed politically contaminated views of OIE or other public agencies.

A third BSE cow was uncovered in the U.S. state of Alabama in March 2006. Lawmakers of the then-opposition Grand National Party, along with their counterparts of the then-ruling Uri Party, criticized what they called a clumsy promotion of a Korea-U.S. FTA, denouncing that “The authorities have readily abandoned the BSE beef issue, among others, even before initiating the negotiation.”¹² The progres-

10. This organization formally opposes a Korea-U.S. FTA and links it with an opposition to the import of American beef. Refer to articles posted in its home page “Statements and Comments” since January 2006, <http://www.kfhr.org/> (accessed June 14, 2010).

11. “Concerns for Life Are also Claimed to Be a Trade Barrier,” *Hankyoreh*, February 6, 2006.

12. “Parties Warn Clumsy Promotion of Korea-U.S. FTA in Succession,” *Hankyoreh*, April 12, 2006.

sive media carried a greater number of articles, contributions and editorials protesting against the government's resumption of American beef imports. A public poll disclosed that 70 percent of Korean housewives believed American beef to be dangerous, and therefore, they would not buy American beef.¹³ A suspicion arose that the difference between Korea and Japan in their negotiations with the United States lay in Korea's submission to U.S. pressures.¹⁴ Kim Sang-jong, a professor at the School of Biological Sciences, Seoul National University, strongly criticized the government decision in a contribution titled, "The Misfortune of Living in an Unscientific Country":

Although the government has permitted beef import on grounds that "lean meat from under-thirty-month-old cow with bones removed is safe," it has been revealed in many countries that BSE has occurred even in such cases. Based on such a scientific ground, Japan, despite U.S. pressure, has decided to import under-twenty-month-old beef only. Given the reality that small restaurants excluded from the provision of attaching country-of-origin labels account for 99 percent, there is no way to keep the people from being exposed to American beef infected by BSE. I'm concerned how much the government's complacency and incompetence with which it has invited by itself the danger of BSE, the death ratio from which reaches 100 percent if inflicted, will endanger the people.¹⁵

Few citizens who have read the above contribution would have thought American beef was safe. In October 2006, the same month, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) television station aired a documentary titled, "A Report on American Beef from BSE-Infected Cattle, a Faceless Horror." It was, in effect, the first video program on mad cow disease by a terrestrial TV network. It was not as shocking

13. "Housewives Won't Eat American Beef Because of Fear, a Poll Says," *Hankyoreh*, August 14, 2006.

14. "Is It Alright for Us to Eat American Beef, Banned by Japan?" *Hankyoreh*, September 13, 2006.

15. "The Misfortune of Living in an Unscientific Country," *Hankyoreh*, October 3, 2006.

as the MBC *PD Notebook* program, aired a year and a half later, was; the documentary nonetheless attracted a sizeable response.

Heated emotional arguments were exchanged between Korea and the United States over bones uncovered from imported American bovine meat products on seven occasions during about a year-long period from November 2006, when the beef import was resumed, to October 2007. In that process, the progressive media blocked the Roh administration from concluding the beef import negotiation by exerting itself in reinforcing among the public the equation that “beef with bones equals BSE-infected beef.” The import of meat with bones had to be specified in the agreement without fail. The U.S. Congress was enraged. Min Dong-seok, the chief Korean delegate to the beef import negotiation with the United States, gave the following account on this point:

The seeds of a tragedy were already conceived when we returned the whole container when even one piece of bone was detected in it. It was a narrow-minded step. The United States was enraged and in turn our relationship lost faith and became strained. As the U.S. Congress moved to rupture the FTA negotiation with Korea, the president stepped forward. President Roh Moo-hyun telephoned his American counterpart George W. Bush and promised him to resolve the beef issue in accordance with international criteria. He also promised to import over-thirty-month beef with bones as well. The chief executive made a public pledge that the Korean government will keep the promise. The economic planning minister and concurrent deputy prime minister reconfirmed the presidential pledge at a press conference, and the administration convened a meeting of economic ministers at which it adopted a position based on OIE criteria, and informed it to the U.S. administration (Min 2010).

Meanwhile, in March 2007, President Roh issued a statement addressed to the citizens, asserting that “our progressive politicians conducting a campaign alleging that a free trade agreement will bring into the country BSE-infected cows are engaged in a dishonest struggle,”¹⁶

16. “President Tells ‘Politicians Opposing FTA Not to Tell a Lie,’” *Hankyoreh*, March 21, 2007.

and affirming that the government will conduct negotiations “with the United States, respecting OIE criteria, in April 2007.” After all, the Korea-U.S. FTA negotiation was successfully concluded on April 2, 2007. Hong Seung Kwon, a professor at the Medical College, Seoul National University and a member of the Hyangrin Presbyterian Church Korea-U.S. FTA Countermeasures Committee, had the following contribution published, in which he maintained that “the citizens’ right to life” is being threatened:

The Roh Moo-hyun administration has forsaken the citizens’ right to life. . . . The OIE decision is not “scientific,” but “political.” Isn’t it a “political” decision to recognize even bones and intestines produced in a country in which “the BSE danger is controlled” as the objects of trade? Even all European countries from which BSE originated don’t import American and Canadian beef. Such outcome of the negotiations cannot but be called “one destroying the life and health of the people for the sake of profits on the part of U.S. businesses.”¹⁷

Professor Hong omitted mentioning in his contribution that Europe’s ban of American beef was an issue not of BSE, but of hormones, and the fact that the United States won in a suit it lodged with WHO. But the Korea-U.S. controversy over cow bones left serious aftereffects. Because the Korean government, which, upon finding a small bone in the U.S. beef not visible even in an X-ray detector, had turned back and junked the entire cargo on grounds that “100 percent safety is not verified” and suspended American beef import, changed its attitude within a few months. When backbones were again uncovered on October 5, 2007, the Korean government suspended not the import but merely the quarantine of U.S. beef. The Korean government in general and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, in particular, began to lose public trust.

17. “Korea-U.S. FTA Exchanged for the Citizens’ Right to Life,” *Hankyoreh*, April 4, 2007.

Seven out of ten citizens objected to the import of American beef, and when asked “What do you think about the safety of American beef?” no less than 76 percent of respondents replied “unsafe,” polls revealed.¹⁸ The BSE controversy seemed to have submerged for a while when power was changed in the December 2007 presidential election. Behind the scenes, however, President Roh Moo-hyun rejected his ministers’ advice that the Korea-U.S. beef negotiation be concluded before his tenure terminated. He was well aware that the American beef import issue was extremely explosive. The following newspaper report reveals the inside story:

Former Minister Song and Task Force Chief Kim explained a roadmap calling for resolving the beef issue and disposing of a parliamentary ratification bill in February, and asking the United States to have the agreement passed by Congress by July. They then recommended to the president, “Make a resolute decision to resolve the beef issue before the tenure terminates for the sake of the ratification of a Korea-U.S. FTA, an achievement of the administration.” Also present at the meeting was former deputy prime minister Kwon Oh-Kyu. Former president Roh Moo-hyun reportedly got enraged and rejected the recommendation made by former minister Song and Task Force Chief Kim, saying, “Don’t you even feel sorry for me? I’m a total wreck. Do I have to sustain still more criticism? You are bureaucrats, but I’m a politician.”¹⁹

News, potentially negative to American beef, began to reach the country from February 2008. A video of “Downer Cow,” filmed by the Humane Society, a be-kind-to-animals organization, filmed at a slaughterhouse in California, was made public in January 2008, prompting Congress to hold a hearing.²⁰ A Seoul newspaper made the

18. “Seven Out of Ten Citizens ‘Opposed to Import of Beef with Bones,’” *Hankyoreh*, October 20, 2007.

19. “‘Don’t you even feel sorry for me?’ Says Roh Moo-hyun,” *Hankook Ilbo*, June 8, 2008, www.hankooki.com.

20. “Video Reveals Violations of Laws, Cattle Abuses Cows at Slaughterhouse,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2008.

following report on February 19, 2008:²¹

Beef unsuitable for food was produced and marketed in the United States, and the U.S. authorities failed to find how much and how such beef was consumed. . . . More worrying is the Lee Myung-bak administration's easy-going attitude toward American beef. The Lee administration, which is to be launched on February 25, accepted the U.S. stance with a full knowledge of the meaning why the chairman of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, "the point of American beef," was included in the special American mission to the inauguration of President Lee.

Meanwhile, there was an assertion that "95 percent of Koreans are reported to have methionin/methionin (M/M), a genetic factor most vulnerable to BSE, the highest in the world, namely, their probability of catching human BSE is the highest percentage in the world" began to appear in the progressive media.²² On the eve of the Lee Myung-bak administration's conclusion of the Korea-U.S. beef negotiation about two months later, Professor Hong Seung Kwon of the Medical College, Seoul National University delivered a final warning.

A woman in her 20s residing in the state of Virginia, the United States, who has never been abroad, is said to be at the point of death from human BSE. . . . As a medical doctor and biochemical scientist, I issue a warning that American beef is not safe from BSE at all.²³

On April 19, the Lee Myung-bak administration signed the American beef import agreement with the United States. The MBC *PD Notebook* program was aired ten days later and the candlelight vigils started in May. The three core distortions of the MBC program, namely "BSE-suspected downer cows are slaughtered at random," "a woman in

21. "Must We Import American Beef Fully Despite Such Reality?" *Hankyoreh*, February 19, 2008.

22. "I Know What the Blue House Did Last Summer," *Hankyoreh*, February 12, 2008.

23. "Pressures on American Beef Threatening Life," *Hankyoreh*, April 15, 2008.

her 20s residing in Virginia died from human BSE,” and “Koreans are very vulnerable to BSE because of their hereditary genes,” had already been raised in the progressive media. MBC’s *PD Notebook* program ignited the candlelight vigils by disseminating such assertions more dramatically and widely through terrestrial waves.

Collapse of Public Authority

The Korean government, acknowledging the safety of American beef and therefore the authority of international agencies, such as the OIE, concluded the beef import agreement with the United States in April 2008, boldly omitting the risk communication process when the American-beef-is-dangerous perception was so deeply rooted in the public. Domestically, however, the step caused a paradoxical situation of instantly destroying the weakened public authority. The government changed its policy. Many people could neither understand nor accept that the Korean government, which previously turned back a whole cargo of imported American beef by finding bones that were invisible even with an X-ray detector, changed its stance completely in a few months and agreed to import over-thirty-month beef containing bones. The Lee Myung-bak administration’s political calculation influenced a scientific judgment. Providing the instance exhibiting the downfall of the authority of public agencies vividly was the “conclusive debate” on the May 2, 2008 press conference, sponsored jointly by the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries and the Ministry of Health, Family, and Welfare. Until then, public agencies believed in their authority, but what they confronted was a young reporter’s mockery of the government’s change of policy.

According to the report released by the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, upon the minister’s return from the OIE general assembly, our government shared Japan’s stern stance that “lean meat and blood,” let alone brain and spine, “are dangerous,” and accordingly their import, too, is not permissible. Only

three months have elapsed since the report was issued. How can the public servants who have handled the same question change their stance so momentarily?²⁴

In response, the group leader Yi Sang-gil said, “The May 2005 remark that lean meat and blood are dangerous was made in defense based on an unverified research outcome and was not verified internationally in a subsequent debate. The removal of the thirty-month limit came following some difficulties because our assertion lacked a scientific basis strong enough to upset the OIE Control Bureau’s guidance decision.” Yi’s assertions are true, but failed to win the public trust needed for persuasion. The Roh Moo-hyun administration failed to defend public authority, and the Lee Myung-bak administration left the government ministries that lost public authority before candlelight waves unprotected politically.

What demonstrated the tumbled public authority at the conclusive press conference most dramatically was this first question made by a reporter: “Beef of over-thirty-month cattle is traded at below the third grade at the Majang-dong slaughterhouses in Seoul. Why does the government act like a sewage plant by importing such beef?” The fact that such a question could be openly raised at a formal press conference, attended by pertinent cabinet ministers and experts from government agencies and relayed live by TV networks, represents how the authority of state agencies had completely collapsed. Totally unverified private authority began to fill the vacuum left by the dismantled public authority. It is a fact, however, that the very private authority persistently attacked public authority at home and abroad. Woo Hee-Jong, a professor at the Veterinary College, Seoul National University, who served on the Expert Consultation Committee within people’s council for countermeasures against mad cow disease, delivered a lecture while the candlelight vigils were underway, in which he said, “Prof. Hwang Woo-suk fabricated researches on the background

24. “Conclusive ‘Beef’ Press Conference Turns into Site of Denouncing Government,” *Media Today*, May 2, 2008.

of the authoritative foreign journal *Science*, and the Korean government is implementing a policy neglecting the people's health, borrowing the authority of an international agency called OIE.”

Fact Distortions by Expert Groups

Following the candlelight vigils and the collapse of public authority over the safety of American beef, BSE experts who asserted the danger of the beef prevailed in the debate. Their stance, unlike that of public agencies, did not change for a few years, despite the change in government. Accordingly, their voices instantly could exercise strong influence on the entire population through the candlelight vigils. But the methods and grounds used by natural scientists, who energetically stressed the danger of American beef, to attack public authority differed substantially from those employed in ordinary academic debates. First, they did not raise doubts about public authority through academic journals at home and abroad. The medium they used was mostly the progressive media and civic groups' websites. Second, their assertions contained too many faults and distortions, evident even to laymen. Some examples are as follows.

In a forum titled, “Scientific Truth of BSE and the Counterplan of Korean Society,” held in June 2008 when the candlelight vigils were at their height, Prof. Woo Hee-Jong claimed that in the United States, unlike the EU countries, no specified risk material (SRM) is fully removed from slaughtered cows and presented the following grounds:

Pathogen propagation and tissue infection in the progress of a disease within individual bodies infected by a disease are identical in every country. . . . With absent scientific data verifying that BSE in the United States differs from that of the EU, it is reasonable to follow the more strict criteria of the EU, which knows about BSE better.²⁵

25. “President Lee Alone Doesn't Hear BSE Danger,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, May 19, 2008, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=20080519-1911062&code=940707 (accessed August 12, 2010).

Prof. Wu's claim is not true, however. In order for the claim to be true that "the occurrence of a disease and the aspects of its progress are identical in every country," the assertion should also be true that "the occurrence of a disease and the aspects of its progress are identical at any time." But EU's regulations about specified risk material have moderated continuously, because BSE has continued changing in occurrence and progress. *TSE Roadmap*, published by the EU in 2005, for instance, set up the following strategy for changes to be taken from 2009 to 2014:²⁶

Specified Risk Material: If BSE cases are not detected below a certain age or drop below an agreed prevalence, the obligation to remove the specified risk material (SRM) may be withdrawn within his age group. Alternatively, a permanent minimal list of SRM, in particular nervous tissues (brain, spinal cord) of certain age groups of cattle, may be considered as a precautionary measure against future epidemics or sporadic cases (European Commission 2005, 14).

BSE cases that occurred in the United States are atypical or sporadic cases, referred to in the EU roadmap. Prof. Woo Hee-Jong, in a bid to use the point that the SRM regulations of the United States, whose number and aspects of BSE cases incomparably differ from those of the EU, are weaker than EU regulations as grounds for supporting his claim that American beef is dangerous, ignored the EU plan of easing the SRM regulations that had long been made public.

Wu Seok-kyun, policy director of the Korea Federation of Medical Group for Human Rights, claimed, "The U.S. livestock industry will gain a profit of \$200 million a year in case it exports parts excluded from SRM in the Korea-U.S. beef agreement alone, including \$9.6 million from the export of intestines unused in the United States and \$25 million from that of advanced meat/bone separation

26. European Commission, *TSE Roadmap* (Brussels: European Commission, 2005), p.14, http://ec.europa.eu/food/biosafety/bse/roadmap_en.pdf (accessed June 22, 2010).

and recovery (AMR).” But Wu’s claim that small intestines are not used as food in the United States is untrue. Intestines are used mainly as sausage skin in the United States, and their consumption is not small in quantity at all.²⁷

YTN (Yonhap Television News), a Korean news network, broadcast on June 8, 2008, the following report titled “the United States Requests Canada to Segregate over 30 Months”:

A stir is being created as the United States has asked Canada to segregate and mark over-thirty-month beef it imports from the latter. This provides a scientific ground based on which Korea may demand to the U.S. government that segregation and marking of over-thirty-month beef be specified in the sanitary conditions of the beef to be imported.²⁸

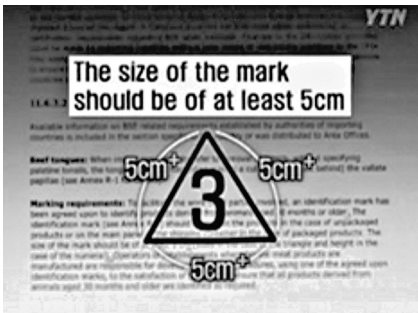


Figure 4. Homepage of the Canadian Beef Breeds Council aired on YTN

The homepage of the Canadian Beef Breeds Council then appeared on the screen and a triangle mark classifying thirty-month-old beef was shown. Few viewers suspect the objectivity of such a report. The report was false, however. Canada had no need whatsoever to classify the age of beef it exported to the United States. The triangle, aired on YTN, was to be used when other countries requested age classification.

Q2: Can the shipments contain a mixture of both UTM (under 30 months) and OTM (over 30 months) meat for export?

A2: Yes. The new rule will allow importation of bovine meat products of all ages provided specified risk material (SRM) is removed

27. “Return of Small Intestine Boosts Bottom Line of U.S. Beef Exporters,” <http://www.beefusa.org/uDocs/smallintestinerade.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2010).

28. “U.S. Asks Canada to Segregate Over-Thirty-Month Beef,” YTN, June 8, 2008, http://www.ytn.or.kr/_In/0102_200806080024552059 (accessed August 12, 2010).

from the products. As all products are eligible, no segregation between OTM and UTM meat will be required when products are in trucks used to transport meat to the USA.²⁹

In the meantime, a practice prevailed in which the opponents presented to the public facts testifying the danger of American beef but let the citizens project BSE danger themselves by excluding the lineage of the facts presented. Park Sang-pyo, chief policy maker of the Veterinarians' Association for Public Health, for example, made the following claim in late June 2008 when the candlelight vigils weakened as a result of a successful additional negotiation, suspending the import of over-thirty-month bovine meat products pressured by the public protests:³⁰

1. BSE has been uncovered in under-thirty-month cattle as well.
2. Lean meat also contains transformed prion, a BSE substance.
3. The BSE inspection system of the United States cannot be trusted because only 0.1 percent is inspected.

It was during the early BSE period in Europe that mad cow disease was uncovered in under-thirty-month cattle. The lowest age for BSE occurrence is closely related with the quantity of transformed prion contained in feeds. With meat and bone meal banned, the minimum and average age of BSE occurrence has increased year by year, and no BSE occurs in under-thirty-month cattle any longer in Europe as well as America. Hence, no BSE inspection has been conducted on under-forty-eight-month cattle in Europe. In order for transformed prion to be uncovered in lean meat, infected cattle has to survive for quite a while after the occurrence and the transformed prion must reach peripheral nerve systems. Few BSE-infected cattle survive that

29. "CFIA Questions and Answers USDA Final BSE Rule Live Cattle and Bison," http://www.canadianbeefbreeds.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=92&Itemid=34.

30. "American Beef and BSE Disaster," *Hankyoreh*, August 30, 2008, <http://asset.hani.co.kr/arti/SERIES/60/152793.html> (accessed August 12, 2010).

long, and besides, such cattle are not slaughtered. BSE inspection is done not for food safety, but constitutes surveillance done to statistically verify BSE occurrences. Steps for food safety are guaranteed by the removal of specified risk material.

Emergence of “Coalitions of Media, Experts, Civic Groups, Patrons of Media Outlets, and Political Organizations”

One who has pursued the development process of how the BSE candlelight vigils developed cannot avoid a perplexing dilemma that arises from the false information presented by some scientists. Dismissing the falsehood to be a result of the scientists' ignorance clashes with their reputation. On the other hand, an interpretation of the falsehood as a deliberate act leads to suspicion of their sincerity. Such a dilemma never actually existed, however, due to the emergence of “strongly ideologically motivated feedback structure” that may be dubbed “coalitions of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations.” When a very politically sensitive issue of determining the facts arises, the role of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations in the coalitions follows what the entire coalitions pursue.³¹

In such coalitions, for example, reporters assume the role of semi-experts on socially controversial issues, requiring the knowledge of experts, deviating from their proper role of balanced informers, and media outlets voluntarily become the outposts of information production. Experts, too, do not hesitate to distort information in a way to support what the coalitions pursue, instead of providing balanced views. Civic groups, instead of pursuing lasting values or keep-

31. An aspect of the coalitions can be seen from the sponsorship and supporters of and speakers at a forum, titled, “The Truth of Candlelight Vigil Movement That Cannot Be Concealed by Distortions, Seen on the Occasion of the Second Anniversary of the Candlelight Vigils,” Health and Alternatives, held on May 8, 2010, http://www.chsc.or.kr/xe/?document_srl=33560 (accessed August 10, 2010).

ing distance from the government and irrespective of the regime in power, publicize themselves as the support base of the coalitions “in the name of the citizens.” Patrons of media outlets in the coalitions, too, function as the substructure of coalitions, instead of spontaneously choosing information. They prefer enjoying a comfortable life within the coalitions that consistently dispose of everything ranging from information production to its consumption and evaluation, to their independent judgment. When something like the candlelight vigils take place, they have an illusion of overcoming their passivity as information consumers by transmitting distorted information through numerous web blogs and bulletin boards. Political organizations in the coalitions are not interested in public welfare in general, nor are forces guiding the coalitions from far-reaching perspectives. Their main interest lies in gaining political advantage in the shortest possible period of time. Thanks to the existence of such coalitions, practically no disadvantages ensue to experts who distort facts. Accordingly, experts’ views, enjoying support from a considerable portion of patrons of media outlets, the press, civic groups, and political organizations, are not dismissed even if they clash with the authority of state and international organizations. Even in the worst case, they are left as minority opinions requiring further verification.

Important here is the fact that when public authority clashes with private authority, the coalitions first of all grant equal rights to both parties of a controversy. “State agencies say this, and the experts we trust say that. As a layman, I don’t know the truth.” This is the reaction of those patrons of media outlets in the coalitions who try to see the matter objectively when public authority clashes with private authority. In short, experts enjoying the support of the coalitions can expect at least equal treatment from patrons of media outlets even when they provide distorted information. Most citizens are unable to completely understand issues of natural science. Natural scientists took advantage of this point in order to intervene in the candlelight vigils. The method natural scientists employed in their intervention reveals this more clearly. Academic theses in general are published after peer reviews. But natural scientists submitted their BSE contri-

butions to media outlets directly, and the press made the contributions a *fait accompli* by putting extremely inciting titles like “Korea-U.S. ETA in Exchange for Citizens’ Right to Life.” In addition, assertions seemingly concerned about public health such as “American beef from over-thirty-month cattle is dangerous” and “American beef with bones are very dangerous,” involving American beef, which is not essential for daily life due to the availability of a horde of alternatives, could always expect public response. In other words, infrastructure exists in Korea under which natural scientific distortions can prevail without restraint. In an incident like the BSE candlelight vigils in which a great number of citizens participated positively, furthermore, the participants do not have to necessarily change their views even if it was later revealed that there existed no substance for fear. Not only because the experts who continuously back up their beliefs exist, but also because they could embrace yet another pretext that “they were disappointed in the mistakes the Lee Myung-bak administration has committed.” And above all else, the participants had no actual benefits to gain from changing their views. Unless the views of the substructure of the coalitions change, there is no need for media outlets, civic groups, and political parties to specifically admit their mistakes.

On the other hand, Korean society is completely open to information. If it wants, society can verify any data concerning the safety or danger of American bovine meat products, available at public agencies at home and abroad. But when public authority collapsed as one party of the controversy, official position of the public agencies was considered as no more than one of the various assertions made at the time of candlelight vigils in 2008. In other words, the emergence of ideologically motivated coalitions that questioned the credibility of public authority even led to contradictory judgments of factual truths along ideological lines.

On the whole, whether one trusts the government or not and whether one supports Lee Myung-bak or not showed a close relationship with the beef-is-safe perception. . . . Those trusting the government perceived that beef is safe about 400 percent more than

those who did not. Lee Myung-bak supporters embraced the beef-is-safe perception about 230 percent more than nonsupporters. The figures show the perception is largely a political product. . . . The more one trusted civic groups and used the Internet, the more he or she felt insecure about the safety of American beef (B. Jo 2008, 92).

In incidents or policies causing great political ripples, therefore, Korean society finds with few exceptions the functioning of “coalitions of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations.” Once an incident of great social ripples takes place, they immediately organize candlelight vigils and organize “so and so facts determination committee.” Namely, determination of truth is not segregated at all from social and political drives. Consequently, phenomena of extreme closure and autism of information take place in an open society like Korea’s. In such a case, the Internet promotes the snowball effect of these self-oriented groups’ ideas, rather than serving as a positive medium of communication.

Conclusion

The massive expansion of the 2008 BSE candlelight vigils confirmed a changed structure of public debate in Korea by “coalitions of media, experts, civic groups, patrons of media outlets, and political organizations.” Not only the administration and ruling party but also the conservative media, intellectuals, civic groups, citizens, and political parties did not fully understand this fact. Korea’s progressive media, intellectuals, civic groups, citizens, and political parties, on the other hand, succeeded in determining the direction of public opinion and power in a vacuum created by collapsed public authority to a considerable extent. At the same time, the fact was made clear that the system of determining the truth in Korean society was being seriously shaken. Though the possibility for an authoritarian regime to re-emerge in Korea has gone since its democratization, the authority of public agencies needed for debate and dialogue is being shaken.

As a result, Korean society now takes it for granted that private authority stands on an equal footing with public authority. Allegations that the March 26, 2010, sinking of the Navy corvette Cheonan by a North Korean torpedo was fabricated offer another example.³² But it is not the proper role of public authority to engage in disputes with private authority. The role given by society rather calls for it to make a final judgment on a variety of private views and accordingly accord public agencies with authority. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), for example, in response to an inquiry from a company wanting to use bovine intestines as sausage skin, judges whether to permit the request by calculating the maximum quantity of BSE pathogen citizens can take in the worst case.³³ This is the ordinary formula in which public authority should communicate with private authority. The United States, too, upon introducing safety regulations concerning BSE, publicly notifies interim decisions of pertinent public agencies, and experts reply to questions received during a specified period of time. A publication of final regulations contains the questions and answers as well as finalized regulations. “Conclusive debates” involving the candlelight vigils and the corvette Cheonan are by no means a communication formula public authority can take. A dispute arguing with grounds presented is a typical example of reaching a reasonable decision, but no grounds can be presented on all assertions. Hence, a conclusive debate should stay within public authority. No disputes can be concluded if public authority becomes a party of a debate in a dialogue on an equal footing with outsiders.

Granting the rightful authority to public authorities rather than establishing private authorities as their equals does not run counter to the freedom of ideology. Ideological freedom is open to all possibilities, but public authority involving man’s daily necessities and life must make realistic conclusions. Often mentioned as conditions of

32. See Kang (2010). This book contains almost all suspicions private authorities have raised about the Joint Investigation Group’s conclusion that the warship Cheonan was torpedoed and sunk by North Korea.

33. “Scientific Opinion on BSE Risk in Bovine Intestines,” EFSA, September 10, 2009, <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/scdocs/scdoc/1317.htm> (accessed August 5, 2010).

democracy are the eradication of authoritarianism and the opening of all information. But based on them alone, the truth cannot be determined through a dialogue. In order for disputes to become means of the pursuit of truth in the Platonic sense, instead of being an enumeration of monologues, an authority recognized by all parties of a debate is absolutely needed. No productive debate can be conducted when this common authority is questioned. In view of this, I conclude that the changed structure of public debate in Korea typified by the candlelight vigils can never be said to have contributed to Korea's democracy.

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