
New Technologies and a New Generation of Activists in South Korea

Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea, by Jiyeon Kang. 241 pages. 2016. University of Hawaii Press. ISBN 9780824856571

John SAGERS

Igniting the Internet carefully introduces two simultaneous developments in South Korean politics between 2002 and 2012: First, the book documents how the growing use of the Internet to organize political causes contributed to a new model of political activism. Second, this is closely related, it analyzes the changing nature of activism among the first generation in Korea after the democratic reforms in the 1990s. Through scrutinizing documentary evidence and interviews with participants, Jiyeon Kang offers three convincing case studies of post-authoritarian political activism surrounding: 1) the 2002 acquittal in a US military court of American service members whose military vehicle killed two South Korean girls in a residential neighborhood, 2) the Presidential election of 2002, and 3) the South Korean government's decision to resume US beef imports in spite of public concerns about mad cow disease. Based on these case studies, the Kang maintains that the Internet has provided new avenues of political expression that a new generation of activists has used to transform ideological political movements in the authoritarian era of Cold War into a much more amorphous and ad hoc form of political participation, where people from a variety of backgrounds support political causes they

John SAGERS is Professor of East Asian History at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon, USA. E-mail: jsagers@linfield.edu

find captivating and return to their regular lives when interest in a cause dissipates.

In the introduction of the book, Kang reviews the literature regarding the role of social media in politics, noting that the Internet can both rally public attention for serious engagement with a given cause and contribute to “slacktivism” where online outrage fails to translate into concrete action (p. 7). Focusing on the concept of captivation, the author seeks to understand “what grabs an Internet user’s attention among competing discourses and makes the user further circulate the material,” before presenting “a new popular cultural dynamic on the Internet through which shared yet underarticulated public sentiments can be voiced without translation into the language of established politics” (p. 8).

Igniting the Internet begins with the story of two 13-year-old girls killed in an accident involving a US military vehicle while walking in their own neighborhood in a suburb of Seoul in 2002. Images of the girls’ bodies crushed provoked widespread public outrage and became a “symbol of the country’s stature: a client state suffering from the remnants of the Cold War era” (p. 2). When in November 2002 the US military court found the service members involved not guilty of negligent homicide, youth activists organized candlelight vigils with slogans like “Retrial of the GIs at a Korean Court” and “Withdrawal of US troops from Korea” (p. 3). During the first decade of the 2000s, the Internet facilitated similar youth-led candlelight vigils for a number of causes. Here Kang asks why some causes sufficiently captivated Internet users to the point of real-world demonstrations while others did not. To answer this question, the author sheds light on several theoretical perspectives that suggest that the Internet creates a new “attention economy” where citizens are captivated by images, videos, and memes, some of which go viral and circulate widely (pp. 8–9). With much information available to Internet users, the author concludes that it is difficult to predict which stories will attract people. However, there may be more comments here on what kinds of issues are more likely to attract the wide range of online interests needed to generate political participation in the real world.

Internet youth activism, as Kang documents, was possible by South

Korea's widespread adoption of broad-band internet connections. With 57.4 percent of households in 2002 and 98 percent of households in 2012, Korea had the highest broadband use in the world. With 70 percent of youth ages 13 to 24 reporting playing online games in 2003 and 50 percent making new friends through online games, Kang persuasively asserts that this comfort with online communities would promote future political activism. In addition to online gaming, alternative news sites, sites devoted to parodies of conservative media, and investigative journalism sites also grew rapidly in South Korea. Alternative media and parody sites mocked conservative politicians and fueled anti-Americanism that erupted in 2002 after President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech and the disqualification of South Korean speed-skater Kim Tong-song at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics (pp. 38–39). With this ground-breaking research on the role of the Internet in Korean political activism, Kang helps us understand how new communication technologies and online community building can bring people together to support political causes.

Kang also makes an important argument regarding the changing political sensibilities of the first generation of South Koreans to grow up under a more democratic regime. Where activists in their parents' generation of the 1970s and 1980s faced potentially severe consequences of challenging authoritarian regimes, participants in the recent political causes can join without fear of reprisals. Risking imprisonment or worse to oppose government policies, protestors in the authoritarian era tended to be professional activists with deep commitments to their causes. In contrast, Kang points out that recent activism is more casual in post-authoritarian South Korea as people more free to participate in candlelight vigils and then return to their works or studies. The protests surrounding the two girls' deaths were therefore fundamentally different than the "authoritarian-era model of an ideologically driven social movement" and that the "primary political significance of this online discourse lay in the ability of users to share feelings, to circulate their captivation with the deaths, and to mobilize other users to attend the proposed vigils" (pp. 83–84). The Internet-brokered politics of captivation allowed for expression of dissatisfaction with the US

military's handling of the case, as well as the US military presence in Korea, without explicit connection to existing political factions and their ideological agendas.

The candlelight vigils continued until the end of 2002 and contributed to the December 19 South Korean Presidential election victory of liberal candidate Roh Moo-hyun over the conservative Lee Hoi-chang. In this second case study, the author insists that younger voters were attracted to Roh's campaign message of political change and greater independence from the United States in matters of foreign policy. In the election, "captivation with Roh was similarly not the mere endorsement of a politician but a metonymic expression of underarticulated yet potent hopes and desires for a new politics, which found an anchor in Roh" (p. 70). In contrast, Lee's conservative message of continued reliance on the United States for national security in Korea failed to resonate with younger voters who did not share the same sense of vulnerability as those who suffered from the Korean War and Cold War tensions with North Korea. Through posts online, Internet users circulated satirical pieces portraying Lee as a part of the old establishment that cared more for protecting their wealth and smooth relations with the US and Japan than with the fate of the Korean people (p. 72). However, once Roh was elected, Internet users quickly became disillusioned and attacked Roh's policies that they perceived to be a return to business as usual for Korean politics.

A third case study followed the 2008 protests against the South Korean government's decision to resume US beef imports, which had been suspended five years ago due to fears of mad cow disease. Activists staged a petition and used social media to call people to "candlelight festivals" to express their opposition to the government's neo-liberal policies to deregulate markets. Satirical images of Presidents Lee Myung-bak and George W. Bush in their 2008 summit, with a mad cow's head pasted over President Bush's, circulated online. Protestors shouted the slogan of "You eat the mad cow" at festivals that more closely resembled carnivals than political demonstrations. Although conservative media quickly called the protesters "leftist" and "anti-American," the author argues that they did not actually

have the same political ideology found in authoritarian-era movements.

In this well-crafted book, Kang tells two important stories. First, a new generation who grew up in a more democratic South Korea and defined itself as a new style of activism in the early twenty-first century. Second, the Internet has created new spaces and modes of activism in which large numbers of digital natives were connected together for collective action in ways impossible for earlier activists. *Igniting the Internet* is highly recommended for scholars who are interested in the changing nature of youth activism in Korea and the role of technology in shaping this change. Although the author could have been a bit bolder in sketching out what characteristics “captivating” issues had in common, the “politics of captivation” was still a helpful theoretical focus for research. The Internet facilitated more widespread activism by disseminating many different stories that garnered various levels of outrage from young citizens. Some stories gained a critical mass of attention and activism poured into the streets from Internet discussion boards. Through several comprehensive case studies, the author develops a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. Where this book really shines, however, is in its analysis of a new generation of activists coming of age. Interviews with participants illuminated how activists thought about themselves as citizens and political participants as Internet discussions and candlelight vigils eclipsed ideologically charged confrontations with police as important modes of political activism in post-authoritarian South Korea.

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Managing Editor of *The Review of Korean Studies*
The Academy of Korean Studies
323 Haogae-ro, Bundang-gu, Seongnam-si, Gyeonggi-do, 13455, Korea

Tel: 82-31-730-8746
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