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Abstract

This research aims to understand how digital communication of ordinary people transforms overall democracy by expanding the political power of the public. By conducting a case study of the Republic of Korea (South Korea, hereafter "Korea"), which is one of the advanced digital societies as well as a democratic society in the world, the author investigates from how digital communication has settled in the society to what kind of democratic role digital communication has been playing by analysing social issues in the civil society. The study contributes to an empirical gap in demonstrating how the dynamic of social uses of digital tools among ordinary people has affected the transformations of democracy in a democratic society.

Key words

Digital media, Political communication, Public participation, Civic power, Democracy

I. Introduction: Different Perspectives of the Digital Technology Impact on Democracy

As world politics and society have become increasingly digital-mediated since the 1990s (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2010, p. 2), political communication through digital media has received a large amount of academic attention (Hsu & Park, 2012, p. 169). Many scholars have investigated various respects of the relationship between democracy and digital media communication (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Fox & Ramos, 2011; Price, 2013; Giansante, 2015; Allen & Light, 2015; Lee, 2017). Among these scholars, some critics claim that the impact of digital media on democracy cannot be seen only with an optimistic view because digital communication may bring about a result of undermining democratic values rather than supporting democracy, while others argue that digital technologies have a political effect on democracy in various ways.

In particular, Dahlgren (2001, pp. 52-53) maintains that digital communication can offer opportunities for motivated and improve the public sphere to ordinary people. In addition, Dahlgren (2005, p. 160) adds that 'the public sphere on digital platforms, which is at the forefront of evolving the public's political participation, can be allowing citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics.' Stoker (2006, p. 202) specifically emphasises that the mutual connection based on the advanced digital technology provides an opportunity for 'organisational hybridity, mixing and switching between repertoires associated with political parties, social movements, and interest groups.' In this regard, Hauben et al. (2005) argue that the practice of expanding democracy through digital media would bring about the qualitative development of the previous concept of citizenship and democracy.

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More recently, Mazzoleni (2015, p. 182) argues that digital technology contributes to the development of democratic ideals perhaps more effectively and more rapidly than when people lived in a non-networked society by diffusing a sense of empowerment in the participants in building a strong identity and attracting new followers and activists. Considering this, some other scholars also claim that a more democratic, participatory culture can be shaped by digital media communication and it enables people to take part in politics and democratisation (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Schroeder, 2018; Jamil, 2018). According to these scholars' ideas, it can be assumed that people in the digital age can enhance their political power by enhancing political participation through digital communications, and influence democratisation in society.

However, there are also many observers who consider that the use of digital media as political communication tools in contemporary democratic societies can pose a challenge as much as an opportunity for democratic politics. Some of them argue that the digital media's ability to promote democracy is limited, and they have even hold it responsible for many of the deficiencies that established democracies appear to suffer from (Entman 1989; Voltmer 2006, p. 1). Meanwhile, some others rather claim that digital media technology can instead bring about social inequality by leading to a growing digital divide in democratic freedoms (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste & Shafer, 2004; Ragnedda & Muschert 2013; Hargittai 2018). Given that, Gagnon and Chou (2018: 8) argue, 'the democratic ideal of popular participation is not always compatible with good governance' and may not lead to democracy.

Despite the achievement of digital technology development, there are still many countries suffering from an obvious lack of democracy. In particular, governmental regulation and manipulation of public opinion on digital spaces have been documented in contemporary democratic countries across the world, such as the U.S., the European Union member countries and East Asian countries including Korea (Venturelli, 2002; Verhulst, 2006; Citron & Norton, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). In addition to this, in many countries, digital media acts as a tool for authoritarian stability and durability such as China and the Middle East (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Gunitsky, 2015). In this sense, Freedom House (2019) states, 'Digital platforms are regarded as the new battleground for democracy', explaining that major political forces in authoritarian countries in Asia have expanded their efforts to control digital spaces over the past years (Financial Times, 2018; The Guardian, 2019a & 2019b).

It can be regarded that the democratic ideal in the digital age is not always compatible with all kinds of digitally developed countries. Moreover, given how undemocratic countries navigate the digital age, we can assume that depending on the characteristics of the political forces of each country, based on different political ideologies, the democratic function of digital communications may be operated differently. Given that, it still seems that the concept of democracy needs to be revisited considering country-specific digital developments. Furthermore, democracies need to be understood by reflecting on a certain state's social and political setting and cultural specificities. In this context, it is worth to scrutinise if digital communication technologies enhance democracy in democratic societies through a case study.

With this in mind, the current study analyses the transformed civic power in Korean society through digital communications and ultimately identifies the transformation of Korean democracy. Considering this, it proposes the following general research questions: how has the digital technology development of Korea transformed its citizens' political participation?; how has the digital communication of Koreans changed the political power relationship between the

government and Koreans?; how has the digital communication of Koreans related to landmark political events?; and how has digital communication at the societal level affected democracy in Korea?

II. Digital Developmental Process of South Korea

Korea is a country where both economic and democratisation have developed at a high level quickly compared to other Asian countries (Oh, 1999, p. 2). It is the leading example of a country rising from a low level of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) access to one of the highest in the world (Chung, 2015, p. 107). It had a considerable increase in ICTs uptake, earlier and faster than other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Notable changes caused by technological and environmental advances have influenced political communications among citizens in Korea. In particular, democratic transformation through digital media in the political arena can be easily identified in contemporary Korea.

In the early days of digital culture formation after the late 1980s, PC communication was only a leading culture for the early adopters in Korean society (Lee, 2016, p. 221; Jin, 2017, p. 718). However, it did not take long until the majority of people in Korea were able to use digital devices and act as informatisation contributors. From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, prevalent societal and cultural bases in Korea, such as Internet cafés, Personal Computer (PC) game rooms ('PC Bang' in Korean- 'Bang' means 'room'), and web-community sites, were created due to the well-entrenched digital infrastructure. The digital-mediated culture in Korea significantly developed in many ways, and the speed of spreading the emerged culture accelerated sharply.

It is generally believed that the development of ICTs brought about a new paradigm of the overall Korean democratic society. The extensive use of the high-speed digital network has changed people's digital media usages (Choudrie & Lee, 2004, p. 105). Since the widespread presence of digital media, Koreans could form online communities and have more opportunities to communicate with other people about a variety of topics freely. Moreover, the changes in the way of communication in everyday life among ordinary people in Korea seem to have influenced their ways of political participation. A large number of the population in Korea is able to take part in politics through digital gadgets and mobile devices in very diversified ways. They can express their own opinions and share ideas freely through digital forums and collective dialogues via blogs or web services that the government, as well as private digital companies, provides.

In particular, Lin et al. (2010) predictably claimed that digital participation based on social networking would lead to the transformation of mobilising civic power when the time comes (Isin & Ruppert, 2015, p. 84). The recent democratic actions of the ordinary people in Korea by using digital media communication led to the presidential impeachment due to the political corruption scandal in 2016, which was not a usual phenomenon even in world politics (Min & Yun, 2019). Koreans' political experiences in accordance with digital development at a national level can be applied to other countries that seek democracy in the digital age across the world. Korea can be regarded as a representative country in the world, which has experienced dramatic political achievement in terms of democracy in the digital age.

III. Digital Technology as Political Tools

The first Korean collective actions since the millennium era began with a festive atmosphere when they occupied the streets with celebrating the World Cup in July 2002, which had obviously nothing to do with political affairs (Hauben et al., 2005; Han 2016). This new social phenomenon in Korea shifted a political matter quickly. As many scholars argue that the World Cup experience considerably encouraged Koreans to take part in political actions in the 2002 Candlelight vigils and the presidential election (Song, 2003; Lee, 2005; Han, 2007; Lee, J., 2012). During the World Cup, there was 'an incident where a US armored vehicle killed two Korean middle school girls', Hyo-soon and Mi-sun (BBC, 2002). The commander of the US military expressed regret, and the senior officials visited the memorial altar. They tried to resolve the situation by sending compensation to the victims' families. However, it was not that simple to solve and become a diplomatic problem between Korea and the US.

Although the US military promised to hold talks with the commander after the funeral, they broke the promise of the meeting, using a translation mistake as the excuse. The Ministry of Justice sent a request to the US to recount their justification of the incident, but the US military refused (Song, 2007, pp. 73-74). The citizens were outraged by the unequal relationship between Korea and the US, and they blamed the government's incompetence in handling the unfair situation. Based on this background, people over a wide age range expressed their indignation by having the first candlelight rally on the street as a collective action involved in a political issue (Song, 2007, pp. 73-74). Thousands of Koreans demonstrated in the street in order to protest the verdict from the ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which flavored the US army.

In particular, this incident became a severe social issue since it began to be publicised through online news (Lee, 2004). Through this incident, the Internet has shown that the general public can make a specific issue into major social issues without going through the traditional news media (Lee, 2004). Above all, the spread of information sharing through digital media among ordinary people was considerable and Koreans including young students actively joined the candlelight demonstrations to express their outrage (Hinck, 2018). It can be regarded that this incident offered a significant opportunity for ordinary people in Korea to pay attention to politics, 'representing a new wave of civic activism by non-institutionalised, networked individuals' (Lee, 2012, pp. 132-133).

The Mi-sun and Hyo-soon incident was the first transition from a collective action with celebratory characteristics to collective action with political intentions. Through this case, it was identified that the spread of information sharing through digital media among ordinary people was quite considerable. More important fact is that since then the digital interactivity of the people has begun to influence Korean politics in earnest. In this vein, many observers began to focus on the impact of civic activism and social movement of the citizens through online channels that had an interactive function (Bennett, 2004; Oh, 2004; Kahn & Kellner, 2004 Lee, 2005; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Lee, 2012).

At the end of the same year when the Hyo-soon and Mi-sun incident took place, Roh Moo-hyun (2003 – 2008) was elected as the 16th president in Korea. Roh's online campaigning for the 2002 presidential election worked to mobilise his supporters on digital platforms successfully (Hara & Jo, 2007). At that time, mobilising the people through online communication was regarded as an effective method. The online campaign was also a more cost-effective way that made it possible for tens of millions of people to be reached at a relatively low cost. In addition, the Roh's campaign team attempted to reach the young voters

by using the Internet as the younger generations are heavy Internet users and generally have more progressive tendencies than the older generations.

The 2002 presidential election was different from the previous elections that mobilised the voters by using a lot of money through off-line organisations. The Roh's presidential election campaign team successfully used online platforms to mobilise supporters and voters who were 20 to 30 years old at that time (Lee, 2004). President Roh was elected with the support of young people who were Internet-savvy and were called as the "386" generations, which meant that they were in their thirties when the term was coined, who were university students in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s (Larson & Park, 2014, p. 353). The 386 generations were regarded as the most politically active participants at that time. In this regard, the background to the birth of President Roh leadership can be regarded as a starting point for the civil mobilisation in Korean politics.

With the free-communicative nature of digital platforms, the presidential election campaigns could have been more like a festival based on voluntary participation. The birth of the Roh government itself was possible because the election campaign proceeded during the time when the most active public sphere in terms of political issues was formed of various Internet political webzines and online media. During the presidential election campaigns, a big supporter's fan club was formed on the Internet space called 'Rohsamo' in Korea, which means a group of people who love Roh Moo-hyun. "The number of members grew to be more than 49,000 by July 2002 from its initial membership of about 7,000" (Kim, Moon & Yang, 2004 in Kang & Dyson, 2007, p. 1030).

However, in early 2004, President Roh, who won the election with a successful election campaign, ironically faced a severe political predicament a year after his inauguration. During Roh's presidential period, the opposition party with reasons such as electoral law violations, incompetence and corruption initiated an impeachment proposal (Kihl, 2005, p. 57), which was the first impeachment proposal in the history of Korean politics. However, the people actively opposed the National Assembly's decision to impeach the president. On 12 March 2004, candlelight vigils against the impeachment of President Roh were held, and they spread across the country.

In opposing the impeachment, many people actively expressed their opinions against the decision of the National Assembly by committing collective action (Vries, 2004). In particular, Rosamo had played a key role in organising a candlelight vigil in protest to protect President Roh, and established a novel form of civic political movement organised by Internet users, 'Netizens' (Kim, 2017, p. 275). In the end, the Constitutional Court decided to reject the impeachment trial in May of the same year, and President Roh could return to 'Cheong Wa Dae' (Blue House in Korean).

Considering this, it can be regarded that the ordinary people in Korea achieved what they wanted by actively expressing their opinions and collaborating in demonstrations by using digital technology. The people who had voluntarily organised and participated in political action could have gained more confidence in their collective political actions. Koreans' political experience in the early digital age considerably affected their problem-solving ways in terms of further subsequent social and political issues.

IV. Transition of Koreans' Political Participation in the Digital Age

Kim (2010, pp. 169-170) argued that public participation can have the potential to make considerable contributions to the consolidation and deepening of democracies in various ways: (1) it helps to identify new social issues and interests that have been underestimated by the existing political forces; (2) it provides the public themselves with channels for self-expression; and (3) it lessens the public's sense of political apathy or alienation. Heimans and Timms (2014, p. 2) distinguished the features between old and new political power formation: old political power is established by parties, interest groups and campaigns, but new power, based on the ordinary people, is more 'open, participatory, and peer-driven'.

In the meantime, focusing on digital participation of the public in Korea, Lee, W.T. (2004) sorts out the features of the political participation of the people in the present digital age into six elements: (1) direct action strategies; (2) loose communication via the digital networks; (3) loose ties; (4) horizontal organisation; (5) informal mode of belonging; and (6) identity politics. By classifying the forms of digital political participation (Figure 1), Lee, W.T. (2004) claims that political participation in the digital age is a multidimensional concept. The formation of the public's political participation also involves multidimensional changes in the level of social structure and political process, and systems (Lee, W.T., 2004).

Figure 1. Types of digital political participation in Korea

	Types of Participation	Contents of Political Participation	Specific Digital Spaces
Individual	- Acquisition and use of political information - Formation of political opinions (Expression of opinions) - Information retrieval and recognition on political issues - Individual deliberation, opinion formation, and expression	- Policy related information - E-voting - Policy proposal - E-mail	- Government - Political parties - Politicians - Media - Portal sites
Group	- Political conversations and discussions - Political collective actions (Online Behaviourism) - Collective discussions and Public opinion formation - Collective decision-making and execution	- Agenda setting and public opinion formation - Cyber demonstration (Online protest visit) - E-voting - Political campaigns -Participation of civic societies - Candlelight demonstrations	- Political webzine - Media company websites - Civic groups

Source: Authors' compilation based on Lee, 2004, p. 12.

Tai (2007) claims that 'civil society tends to be evolved from a corporatist and vertical structure to a more horizontal and autonomous' (Jorba & Bimber, 2012; Anduiza, Jensen & Jorba, 2012,

p. 28). Before the digital era, collective political participation of Koreans used to be centered on closed and hierarchical membership networks (Han, 2004 in Hauben & Markoff, 2014, p. 58) such as associative political groups, parties, and associations. However, depending on political and societal situations, Koreans have contributed to politics by voluntarily organising the public sphere or participating in sharing information and ideas (Ryoo, 2009). Considering this, it can be considered that the political participation types of Koreans were changed from traditional interest groups and party-centered offline political participation to digital network-based political participation that can potentially link to collective political actions.

In particular, Korean digital society has shown the operation of the public sphere on digital spaces at various levels and systems during the recent few decades. The connective nature of digital media provides digital media users in society with opportunities to form a public sphere more freely. Since the mid-2000s, diverse types of digital communication spaces have continuously appeared in Korean society from the 'Agora'3 bulletin board, which was formed on a private portal site 'Daum', to the 'Kukmin Sinmungo (e-People in Korean)4' that the Korean government officially provides. Through these digital spaces, the people in Korea have been continuously questioned about the social injustice of the government and have discussed diverse social issues. In short, Koreans could have increasingly enhanced their rights as citizens by actively engaging in the political arena in the digital age.

V. Digital Civic Power as a Threat to the Government

The Lee Myung-bak regime (2008 – 2013), the recent conservative government, particularly tried to use digital media to communicate with the people at the beginning of its term, ostensibly reflecting the social trends of the widespread use of digital platforms in society. However, it did not take long that the government's regulation of digital spaces appeared to become severe. Although the government had to follow the rapidly changing digital trends, which are already widespread and deeply embedded in society, it had shown contradictory attitudes toward public communication. In particular, the issue of the import of US beef related to the 'mad cow disease' during the Lee government directly showed the conflict between the government and the public that could take place in the digital age.

The import of the US beef issue was a complicated issue related to public safety as well as an unfair treaty with the US. Although the Korean government had banned the import of US beef since the US Department of Agriculture officially announced the first case of mad cow disease, it resumed the import of US beef through negotiations between Korea and the US, which caused many controversies (Fox News, 2008). Despite the Lee government's public relations effort through the conventional media such as broadcasting and print media to disseminate information about the safety of US beef, it failed to gather the publics' agreement, and it rather encouraged the public to take part in demonstrations (Cho, Choi & Park, 2012, p. 2).

This political issue led to another big candlelight vigil as anti-Lee's government forces prevailed in online spaces including the bulletin boards of portal sites operated by private companies such as 'Agora'. In the end, it brought about a signature campaign for the impeachment of President Lee, drawing around one million public participants in May 2008 (Cho et al., 2012, p. 2). Through a series of events related to this issue, the Lee administration

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3 The service has been halted on 7 January 2019.
4 It addresses people's complaints against government agencies and encourages people to participate in government to improve policies (https://www.epeople.go.kr/jsp/user/UserMain.jsp).

seemed to recognise that anti-government power on the digital spaces was difficult to control. Furthermore, it seems that the government considered the digital space as a place that was already distorted and must be controlled. In this vein, public communication culture in Korea led to the government's desire to supervise the communicative networks (Lee, 2012, p. 117).

Through this incident, we also need to note that the people who had a wide range of social backgrounds in Korea tended to engage in interactions through digital media actively. Due to the extended range of Internet users, the issues during the Lee government became more severe and expanded. In particular, the involvement of the people, who were usually not interested in political issues, made this incident even more severe (Han, 2010, p. 6). Consequently, this political incident showed that the government's devaluation of civic participation, which was different from the traditional form of participation, could lead to an intense, widespread backlash (Kim, 2012, p. 186).

> *"New participant groups in the 2008 candlelight vigils, who greatly differed from the conventional agents of political movements, include the 'high heel shoe band,' the 'baby stroller brigades,' middle or high-school-aged girls, members of Internet social clubs, and others. Many married women who were not previously interested in politics or social issues learned about the issue of American beef import and the ensuing street demonstrations through Internet social communities where they used to share common interests on topics such as cosmetics, food, interior decoration, furniture, clothing, TV stars, etc. This social origin of new actors shows a fundamental change in the movement's characteristics (Han, 2010, p. 6)."*

VI. Koreans' Collective Political Actions in the SNS Era

Turning to the late 2000s, various Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have emerged and people have been using them across the world. SNSs are defined as communication tools that can increase our ability to share and cooperate, with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organisations (Shirky, 2011). The very word 'social' associated with media may imply that digital platforms are user-centred and that they facilitate communal activities, as the term 'participatory' emphasises human collaboration (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 11). More importantly, social networking mechanisms can contribute to the formation of a relatively equal basis communication system by giving the people equal opportunities in terms of accessibility.

As Koreans' usages of the newer digital platforms such as SNSs and mobile instant messengers since 2010s are prevalent across the world more and more, the characteristics and role of the media in the society are also increasingly in transition. Every individual, as a member of society, has not only actively expressed their opinions through digital communication but also experienced organising and implementing collective political actions. After the preliminary concurrence process through digital communication, the people proactively gathered to express their political demands by organising and participating in collective political movements such as candlelight vigils on the streets. Through a series of social movements that took place through digital communication in Korean society, 'the citizen politics has become issue-led and decentralised' (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 32 in Houston, 2016, p. 2).

Dahlgren (2001, p. 47) maintains that Koreans tend to be connected to one another not just to have a conversation but also to achieve political goals. It can be considered that autonomous

individuals or 'Smart mobs'[5], which is fluid and unpredictable, has led to Korean political participation. Since the mid-2000s, mass political protests have been occurring in Korea using digital platforms such as SNSs as a means of expression, dissemination of information, organising, and mobilisation. By actively taking part in collective actions on the streets, Koreans seemed to exert power as citizens. Considering the recent various political actions in Korea, it can be said that ordinary people in Korea moved away from the existing hierarchical relationship where they obeyed the elite power by restoring popular sovereignty (Kim, 2008, p. 5).

The importance of the digital media communication has been continuously growing, not only as a channel for the communication of information but also as a mechanism of the organisation as well as a tool for collective action in the creation of news. Turning to the mid-2010s, Koreans began to share their political activities with multiple unspecified people by sharing photos that prove their political participation such as participating in elections or candlelight vigils through their personal SNS channels (Kim & Kim, 2013; Lee, 2018; Kim, 2019). Since the public's digital communication became more active in the political arena due to the emergence of SNSs conflicting political issues between the government and civil society have continuously occurred in Korea. On the political side, the people in Korea have voluntarily formed a collective-level smart mob through digital messaging and communicative platforms such as Kakao Talk[6], Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Turning to the Park Geun-hye (2013 – 2016) regime when the use of SNSs widespread, there were continuous public demonstrations on the street to convey complaints about various social problems, such as labour reform and Korean history textbook revision. Among the demonstrations of the people, there was a remarkable demonstration that was organised as an objection to the Park government's measures to 'further promote the casualisation of work, restrict trade union rights and undermine farmer's livelihoods through the Trans-Pacific Partnership'. Around four million participants took part in the public rallies, and the demonstrations were expanded to issues such as trade unions, democratic demonstration, and fundamental rights, and civilian liberties (IUF, 2016).

The demonstrations often showed the armed confrontation between the police under the government and the participants of the rallies (Borowiec, 2017, p. 31). In particular, during the first rally out of the three demonstrations, an old farmer, called Baek Nam-gi, was hit by a police water cannon trying to suppress the demonstration on 14 November 2015. In the end, the farmer died ten months after the incident, but for a while, there were still controversies over the cause of his death for a while. While the government argued that his death was because of a chronic disease he suffered, the public and press continuously claim that his death was due to the government's over-repression (Byun, 2016).

Until then, the characteristics of demonstrations in Korea seemed utterly different from those requesting the impeachment of President Park in peaceful conditions in late 2016. It can be regarded that the Park regime tended to cope with the collective demonstrations of civil society with force, which was similar to the stance of the Lee Myung-bak government that is the prior conservative regime. Considering this, The New York Times reported that "Maina Kiai, the special rapporteur at the United Nations on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, cited Mr Baek's case in criticising what he called excessive use of water cannons

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[5] The term refers to the enhanced ability of group of people to coordinate and cooperate based on digital communication (Rheingold, 2002 in Harper, Palen & Taylor, 2005, p. 209).

[6] Kakao Talk is a free mobile instant messaging application for smartphones with free text and free call features.

by the police and shrinking space for exercising the right to peaceful assembly under Ms Park" (Choe, 2016).

The incident gained attention from the traditional media as well as ordinary people. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that the daughter of Baek Nam-gi informed the people of the progress of the case by continually uploading the related information through her personal Twitter account. The direct information delivery through digital media had an important meaning in that an individual can deliver the information that has not been distorted by the immense political power with a different perspective from the traditional press. Consequently, this case showed that the opinions of the related individuals on social issues could have a significant influence on public opinion in a society where almost all the people in Korea use digital communicational platforms.

Another notable example of the civic collective actions in the digital age can be found recently in Korea: a series of candlelight demonstrations resulted from President Park's scandal proceeded every weekend from November 2016 to March 2017, which was an unprecedented peaceful demonstration around the world. Millions of citizens in Korea demonstrated with candlelight vigils on the streets demanding the resignation of President Park Geun-hye (Fermin-Robbins, 2018, p. 1). The demonstration requiring President Park's impeachment lasted for nearly two months until legal action was carried out. It was first started with a politician's speech on the stage of the demonstration. But after that, it was mainly maintained by ordinary citizens, including high school students.

These collective movements that the civic organisations and ordinary people proactively led were spread out over the country. In addition to this, since the candlelight vigils were conducted peacefully without conflicts with the public power such as the police, many parents brought their children to the spot of the demonstration in order for them to experience democratic civil movements. There were democratic political collective actions that were distinctly different from the democratisation movement thirty years ago.

> *"Internet freedom improved during the period of political mobilisation that led up to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye… Weekly rallies demanding her removal and the restoration of democratic principles were held across the country for months starting on October 29…. Korean citizens' innovative and effective use of physical and digital resources to exercise their political rights (Tharoor, 2017)."*

> *"On the other hand, investigations resulting from the scandal underlined the extent to which freedom of expression had been eroded since the conservative party came into power in 2008 (Freedom House, 2017).*

During the rallies, people actively shared their political actions by SNSs, uploading personal opinions, and photos proving their political actions (Lee, 2018). The number of people gathered in the square increased as the volume of posts on digital platforms did (Seo, 2019, p. 123). Sharing opinions and photos contributed to form a democratic festival atmosphere that made people want to participate in the collective actions voluntarily (Griffiths & Han, 2017). People gathered regardless of age and gender and expressed their will to change the existing regime that was causing confusion in state affairs.

In 2017, 17 million Korean people who took part in the candlelight protests received 'the Ebert Human Right Prize' for the success of the free and peaceful demonstrations and their

contribution to world democracy (Ock, 2017). It was the first time that the people of a particular country received the prize since the human right foundation was established. Regarding this, Freedom House (2017) also reports that Korea's rate of Internet freedom slightly increased by an annual international survey. The driving force for this kind of recent massive political collective action of the citizens in Korean society is social consensus through digital networking. It is an example showing that ordinary people can voluntarily participate in the public social sphere on digital platforms and collaborate to carry out social change.

In the meantime, by adopting digital media as communication tools, more communications between the politicians and the citizens are regarded to take place more often. During the parliamentary hearings regarding the scandal of President Park Geun-hye in December 2016, citizens watching through broadcasting and online actively delivered evidence, that could prove whether the related people's testimony was true or not, to the members of the National Assembly who were representatives, to ask them instead of the public through smartphones in real-time (The Straits Times, 2016). This phenomenon was quite unfamiliar but impressive to Koreans because it was not the usual situation in Korean politics until that time. It seemed like netizen power during the 2000s revived with a mobile presence (Hauben et al., 2005).

Due to the digital platforms' nature of enabling direct, instant interaction today, communication between the political representatives and the people occurs more frequently in various ways. At present, almost all Koreans use digital channels (KISA, 2019), and politicians are not exclusion. The Korean politicians utilise their own digital channels including SNSs and mobile messengers to promote themselves or their political affairs and communicate with the public as they recognise the digital communication channels are effective tools (Lee & Shin 2012). Compared to the traditional media era, it seems obvious that digital interactions between political leaders and followers seem to enhance the relationship between them.

VII. Concluding Remarks: Enhanced Political Power of Koreans in the Digital Age

Although Korea is a country that is built based on the democratic ideology, an authoritarian tendency has still been dominant in Korean political system. There have been practical problems in the Korean political system in terms of the exclusion of the opinions of the public in the top-down decision-making. However, digital media can be regarded as an effective means of the people at the bottom to directly deliver their needs and opinions to the top without going through unnecessary steps. Moreover, it seems obvious that 'the citizens as the subject of power have more possibilities to engage in the political realm by making claims more often through digital media communications in the digital age (Isin & Ruppert, 2015, p. 44).

The recent phenomena in Korean society show that digital communications among the public significantly influence their political behaviours in reality. Considering a series of incidents that have taken place in Korea, we can notice that Koreans evolved their political behaviours by organising and participating in collective political actions through digital communications. Koreans have enormously expanded political participation through digital communication and have diversified the level of political activities through digital platforms. These changes in Korean society can be because the usual digital communication of the people deeply rooted in everyday life naturally led to the public's increased attention and sharing of opinions on diverse social and political issues.

In particular, in the late 2000s, one of the new significant features of the ordinary people's collective political actions in Korean society was that women and young people played an

active role as a driving force of the social movement. Women and the younger generation in Korea had not been active and so involved in political activities until the late 2000s when digital communication widespread (Park, 2010). However, since the US beef incident, they have become a 'newcomer' in the political sphere when joining the 'public sphere' through digital media (Park, 2010). It seems not an awkward argument that the range of public participation was further expanded through digital communication as people who were indifferent in politics in the past started to take part in collective political actions.

Until the mid-2000s, SNSs having a feature enabling interactive communications among people was not a major political tool influencing the formation of public opinion. However, turning to the 2010s, the direct communication nature of digital communication platforms including SNSs seems to more expand Koreans' participation in politics more. In this vein, it can be noticed that ordinary people's political power has also been significantly enhanced in the Korean digital society as digital technology developed step by step.

In the recent digital era, "Traditional Korean values such as respect for authority and hierarchy are rapidly giving way as increased value is placed on individual freedoms and equality" (Lee, S., 2004, p. 2). In particular, Koreans' use of digital media empowered themselves either to push the government to take action against other country's unfair treatment or face governmental authority. This obviously could not have been imagined in the authoritarian regime of the traditional media era. Considering this, it seems that the power relations between political leaders and followers are rearranged at a deeper level through various digital activities. The expanded public participation through digital media is significantly meaningful in terms of democracy in that citizens' political participation through cyberspaces broke the traditional meaning of social order and hierarchy in society.

Digital communication in Korean society has contributed to giving the Koreans more opportunities to communicate, shape the public sphere, and take political actions to impact reality. Today, Korea has become an unprecedented case proving that collective actions based on digital networking among the people can affect the change of the elected leader. Given the recent political and social phenomena such as the public's collective actions in terms of the impeachment of President Park that occurred in 2016, it seems more persuasive that the empowerment of the citizens became even stronger in the recent Korean society due to digital communications. This kind of political accomplishment may result from the people's efforts to express their political demands with senses of ownership, beyond merely giving a petition to the government.

While various political issues in relation to digital communication affecting democracy in Korean society appeared in the process of democratisation during the last few decades, it has been identified that the political activities of Koreans became notable and the scale is considerably enlarged in the digital age. Considering the contemporary Korean society, it cannot be denied that the role of digital technologies is effective in attracting and mobilising those groups of people in the political area (Hindman, 2008). Digital communications among the ordinary people played a crucial role in shaping collective civil power, which considerably affected political evolution. In the Korean context, the implications of digital communication are not significant only as a new communication tool (Dahlgren, 2001), but also in that it arises in an overall context of reshaping democracy in Korea.

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