Real-time networked media activism in the 2008 Chotbul protest

Dongwon Jo

Abstract

This article focuses on people’s media activism in the 2008 Chotbul protest in South Korea which proliferated against a background of the failure of representational system of politics and media. In particular, I analyze how real-time on/off-line interaction through the internet and the mobile phone led to participants’ online actions such as ‘pilgrimage’ or hacktivism, macro coordination, and tele-presence or tele-interaction. Accordingly, I argue that in the process of real-time networked protest between protest sites and online sites, a) grassroots media practices were not limited to ‘street journalism,’ b) its participants have used the internet as broadcast and network media at the same time, and c) the internet itself became not only a space for direct speech but also a site for direct action, while the protest itself became an alternative medium.

Introduction

On May 2 2008, more than 20,000 people gathered at Cheonggye plaza in Seoul and held a Chotbul cultural festival to protest against the negotiation of U.S. beef imports tainted by mad cow disease and even call for the impeachment of President Lee Myung-bak, less than 3 months after he took office. The Chotbul protest against U.S. beef imports began with Netizens’ self-mobilizing and voluntary participation. But it gradually extended to movements opposing the liberalization of public education, the cross-country canal project, the privatization of the public sectors (water, health care, public enterprises, public broadcasting, etc.), and conservative media (Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, DongA Ilbo, hereafter ChoJoongDong).

Since there was no political change, the Chotbul cultural festival and the rallies at Cheonggye plaza from May 2 on, turned into a march through the streets after May 24, which met with violent suppression from the police who wielded shields, batons, fire extinguishers, and water cannon. The overnight protest held on May 31 and June 1 saw an aggravated confrontation between the protesters and the police. June 10 was the 21st anniversary of the pro-democracy June Struggle in 1987 and almost 1 million people participated nationwide. The protests became severely violent again in the end of June, which also saw the participation of religious organizations. The Chotbul protests continued

---

1 This is a revised version of the presentation article for the “2009 SPICES: Agency, Activism, and Alternatives” conference at SungKongHoe University and Vabien Suites, Seoul, South Korea, 13-15 November, 2009. For this revision, I thank the anonymous activist reviewer(s) for suggestions.

2 Chotbul means candlelight in Korean, but it has been used as a metonym for a candlelight protest, so I use the Chotbul as a proper noun both literally and metonymically.
almost every day up until the 100th day on August 15, with different agendas and in different sites. However, the government finally moved to resume U.S. beef imports despite the president’s two apologies. Subsequently the four months-long protests calmed down, although they still continue visibly and invisibly.

In this article, I focus on people’s media activism among many other things during the 2008 Chotbul protest. The protest was marked by people’s creative use of ICTs and media. Since mid 1990s, ICTs and media have enabled people to create and develop enormous activist networks based on common causes more directly and rapidly than in any previous period. And ways of organizing, mobilizing and implementing the protest by using ICTs and media have ranged “from face-to-face to faceless tactics” (Lim et al. 2007). Recent protests in particular have been usually implemented with on/off-line connections. This was already observed in the first massive and large-scale Chotbul protest in 2002. It is said that there are quite similar social composition between two Chotbul protests, including people’s on/off-line media usage. But particularly prominent in the 2008 Chotbul protest were real-time connections and interactions between online and protest sites mediated by debate bulletin boards, chatting rooms, sms messages, and especially live streamings.

In the followings, I will examine the overall aspects of people’s media activism in the 2008 Chotbul protest, and examine how the real-time on/off-line interactions through the internet and the mobile phone led to online actions such as ‘pilgrimage’ or hacktivism, macro coordination, and telepresence or what I call tele-interaction. Finally I will argue some implications of these media tactics for how networked protest could take shape differently.

1. Chotbul media activism

1.1. Beyond the representative system of politics and media

South Korea is no exception to the worldwide political changes - globalization, market pressures toward deregulation, and a crisis of political legitimacy (Castells 2007: 239-40). Free Trade Agreement negotiations with the U.S. since 2006, including the rough-and-ready beef imports negotiation, revealed a crisis of the nation-state’s representative system. That is, it couldn’t managed to deal with the neoliberal globalisation and deregulation directly affecting our daily lives. Additionally there were failures of the exchange rate policy, skyrocketing prices, even a higher unemployment rate continuing right after Lee’s inauguration, as opposed to rosy promises of economic growth resulting in the election of presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak in December 2007.

Furthermore his choices for the cabinet, the agreement of a cross-country canal project behind closed doors, the English-immersion education policy, humiliating diplomacy with the U.S. and Japan, the unnecessary confrontation with North Korea, Lee’s derogatory remarks on women and the disabled, and the corruption of public officials and politicians

---

3 Two middle-school girls were hit and killed by the U.S. military vehicle on June in 2002. This incident had been very little covered by the dominant media at that moment during the World Cup games, but in the end of November one of netizens proposed an gathering with the candlelight so as to mourn for the two girls’ victimized death. People reflexively and widely answered online, and within a few weeks it resulted in tens of thousands people’s gathering off-line every night at the very center of Seoul, which pushed the Bush administration in U.S. to make an apology.
among others never stopped hurting the people’s pride in being Korean. People’s dissatisfaction with and anger at all of these quickly built up. Particularly the young generation, armed with high-tech networked communication skills, was sensitive to and angry with all of these disappointing actions of the new national leader.4

Finally the U.S. beef imports negotiation in mid-April 2008 triggered massive protests, which the government and conservative media nevertheless ignored, distorting, and suppressing people’s voices.5 The violent suppression of street protests by the authorities among others was the direct cause of public rage, leading to the involvement of even greater number of participants in the protest. The public’s distrust of government policies and the representative system of politics in general was similar to its distrust of the mainstream media. When the media failed as a representative institution to reflect the public’s opinion but ignored and distorted the demands of those out on the streets, the people tended to pursue and configure alternatives to them. At this moment, people even went beyond the internet media such as Ohmynews - based on the one-to-many communication model though still accepted as alternative media - and instead sought out and actively made use of blogs, internet cafes, internet debate boards, etc. to set their own agendas and directly express their political opinions. The people didn’t need a centralized approach from hierarchical movement organizations to organize and perform the protests as well. The People’s Countermeasure Council Against Mad Cow Disease, an alliance of some 1,700 civic groups, was formed on May 6, but it has generally played a role to support the protests, not to lead it.6 The lack of leadership was one of the conditions that made ICTs and media even more important features for this networked protests.

To sum up, the 2008 Chotbul, as a leaderless networked protest in the context of the failure of representative system of politics and media, as well as in the confrontation with the police clampdown on the protest, was a ‘social laboratory’ where grassroots media activism emerged explosively.

1.2. The diversity of people’s media activism
People’s media activism in the Chotbul protests can be largely divided into three: a) a voluntary protest-organizing process followed by the formation of public opinions and resistance communities mainly through the internet, b) counter media activities to reform the conservative media, c) alternative media practices for the production and distribution of counter-information, and tactical actions online as well as on the street.

4 For the initial protest-organizing and mobilizing process, especially by teenagers and women in their 20s, see the documentary I co-made called ‘Shall we protest?’ available at http://shallweprotest.net. In this documentary, partly resulting from our ethnographic research on 2008 Chotbul protest, we tried to investigate and show why and how girls and young women took part massively in the uprising.

5 The politicians from the Hanara party (GNP) and conservative media labelled protesters or the Chotbul as “the homeless,” “Satan’s lot,” “democracy of the humble,” “playing with candlelight,”, while surveilling the leadership and even looking for militarization which could make it possible to define protestors as a “mob.” (K. Lee 2008: 175). Law enforcement authorities such as the prosecutor’s office and the police mobilized their forces and conducted their own campaign against the Chotbul protests, including control of the internet.

6 This was the case even for established media activism. There have been strong movements for human rights and media democracy for more than three decades in South Korea. Jinbo.net (Korean progressive network) and its precursors in particular has been an opinion-leading organization of internet media activists and netizens. When it came to the 2008 Chotbul protest, professional media activist movements however supported it but were not well articulated with the people’s media activism.
Formation of public opinions and resistance communities

While Daum Agora as one of the largest internet debate bulletin boards in South Korea quickly emerged as the major hub for public opinion, online communities in internet cafes based on interests or hobbies such as fashion, cooking, shopping, cosmetic surgery, sports, photos, digital devices, alumni became medium-scale hubs. A number of different internet cafes' members conducted online fund-raising for newspaper ads against state policy, and made massive protest calls to the advertisers for the ChoJoongDong newspapers, and even made a community flag to take part as a group in the protests. In addition, many blogs (the “long tail”) formed critical public opinion through individual networks and large portals’ blog services or meta-blog sites.

Existing online communities and blogs were re-formed as resistance communities, when they got angry at government policies and organized, supported, and participated in the Chobul. There were also Chotbul communities newly created by the participants who met in the middle of internet debates or street protests and were grouped in accordance with political perspectives, age, occupation, place of residence, and self-chosen assignment for protests. An anti-Lee Myung-bak internet café, for example, was created on the very next day (December 20, 2007) after he won the presidential election, and has performed a small scale Chotbul protest every week since then. In the middle of the protests, Chotbul communities organized activities such as a ramblers’ group, a reservists’ group, vehicle support group, citizen journalist collective, live streaming teams, human rights observers, medical support group, legal support group, arrestees’ meeting, and an 815 peace action collective among others.

Counter media activities

Mid-May a netizen posted a suggestion at Daum Agora to strike a blow at ChoJoongDong by targeting the advertisers which have put ads in these papers, after noticing the main source of their revenue was advertising rather than subscription fees. A lot of netizens and community members who loved the idea, including the “People’s Campaign to Cease Publication of ChoJoongDong”, as one of the new Chotbul communities, joined together to identify and share the list of the advertisers, and kept making a huge volume of posts and calls every day. As a result of this advertising boycott campaign, about 50 companies and institutions either publicly promised to pull their ads from the three papers or posted an apology on their websites. ChoJoongDong’s advertising revenues significantly decreased at the height of the Chotbul protests.

---

7 Daum Agora is operated by Daum Communications which is the second most important commercial portal sites, and has hundreds of thousands of daily visitors. It consists of debate rooms (divided into 11 topics such as politics, economy, society, etc.), a petition room, a personal story room, and a photo- and cartoon-sharing room. In the petition room, early April 2008, less than two months after Lee’s inauguration, there were several requests to demand the impeachment of the President. As one of them, a netizen called ‘Andante’ posted “I request the National Assembly to impeach President Lee” in the subject of a petition, which was even covered by mainstream media with the fact of rapid increase of the signatures. This has become the unofficial indicator for the falling approval ratings of the Lee administration.

8 Internet café (i.e. Daum cafe) is the name of one of the portal services for online communities.
By contrast, the people have raised more than a million or even 10 million Korean won by voluntary donations to place ads in *Hankyoreh* and *Kyonghang*, which were accepted as relatively truthful newspapers. This meant not only a protest against the government’s ads placed in *ChoJoongDong* reading “U.S. Beef was safe,” but a support for two financially poor but truthful newspapers. Anti-U.S. Beef imports and pro-Chotbul campaign ads to these two papers by families, alumni, and online communities during 3 months have been up to 284 and 214 respectively. If supporting two newspapers by putting ads was temporary, “the bulk purchase of truthful media with voluntary donations and free distribution campaign” by the so-called “Speak the Truth” network continued on an ongoing basis. Another Chotbul protests for the public broadcasters were separately performed in front of the KBS and the YTN, as the Lee government’s attempt to seize the public media progressed step by step.

**Alternative media practices**

In the process of formation of anti-government public opinion which oscillated through Daum Agora via online communities to blogs, there was a mass of political information commons, in which people’s informations - produced with in-depth analysis, rapidly distributed, and visibly and collectively accepted with instant feedback - actually surpassed the existing media. Counter-information and critical comments on government policies and *ChoJoongDong’s* distortions came pouring out, finally leading to online direct actions as well as street protests.

Since it was mobilized on a leaderless voluntary basis, all protesters could be actively involved in choosing tactics and coordinations rather than just participating in pre-organized rallies so that protests were performed in improvised but dynamic ways. Hence the protesters made maximum use of various media; the tools or means for grassroots media activism were not limited to digital camera, phone camera, camcorder, mobile phone, laptop with the wireless mobile access to the internet, live streaming, etc. A great variety of directly expressive media were used, such as graffiti, hand-made pickets, placards, Chotbul girl t-shirts, Samulnori (Korean traditional percussion quartets), street musical bands, struggle songs or popular songs, dances, performances of “V for Vendetta” or “Yu Gwan-sun” (independence activist in 1920s), and face-painting or large-scale collective painting among many. Particularly people’s media production like spoof or political remixes using familiar commercial films or ads simply and clearly expressed antagonism and rage against Lee and the Lee government. The politicization of popular cultures based on an open source approach and people’s aesthetics have created different moods and modes of protests comparing to the past ones, and encouraged more people to feel free to take part in the protests.

**2. Real-time inter-actions**

**1.2 Appropriated or reappropriated technologies**

Internet live streaming is not new, but it has been used a lot for the demonstrations and

---

9 For example, “The Bone Ultimatum” was very popular as a spoof of the Hollywood movie “The Bourne Ultimatum” (2007), remixed with the MBC’s program “100 minutes debate” about the mad cow disease issue and dubbed in Korean.
meetings. However, there emerged two new aspects of it at this juncture. One is that internet live streaming was transformed from a fixed place-based style into a mobile one equipped with the Wibro (device for wireless broadband access to the internet) since the rally changed to street marches on May 24. The other one is that its performers were not limited to media activists or internet media journalists but expanded to the common netizens either as a group or even as individuals. About 100 live performers created their own channel at ‘afreeca.com’ which is a commercial personal broadcasting portal site, and went out to the streets to perform real-time broadcasting. Equipped with laptop, video camera, Wibro, or headset, anyone could transmit live video about the situation on the protests while moving around. On the viewers’ side, they usually opened up several live broadcasting windows to check here and there, and simultaneously exchanged follow-up information through the multi-channels such as chatting rooms on the same live broadcasting window, Daum Agora, instant messenger, and sms. And some active bloggers made live postings about on-going changes of street situations by the minute.

When it comes to the mobile phone, sms messages were used for disseminating urgent information, and photos or videos taken with it were either transmitted to friends’ mobile phone or uploaded later on to the internet with some notes about what happened. Such immediate message exchanges or sharing also occurred between protesters at each site so as to manage to shake off the police. For the purposes of instant message exchanges and discussion, people also used the internet debate boards as if they were in the chatting rooms as a real-time interaction. As a result, Daum Agora, where thousands of posts were posted every day, surpassed any other existing news media in terms of speedy and vivid information. So even those who previously hadn’t used it tried to regularly visit Daum Agora to check out how things were each day, when and where the next protest was planned with what tactics, and even how things were going right now. As such, the Chotbul was one of typical networked protest with speed, connectivity, and mobility. Now let’s examine what type of protest tactics were brought up by the real-time on/off-line interactions through them.

2.2. ‘Pilgrimage’ or hacktivism

First, actions for disobedience and solidarity were taken a lot. For example, as soon as it was announced that the police were investigating “Andante” who posted a request to impeach President Lee at Daum Agora petition room and later was known to be a high school student, a great number of netizens simultaneously went to visit the free board of the Nation Police Agency website to make duplicate posts like “I’m Andante,” which made the website temporarily inaccessible. Similarly, once the prosecution issued a subpoena those who led the ChoJoongDong ads boycott campaign, a whole bunch of posts such as “I made a protest call” or “arrest me” were bombarded onto the website of the Prosecutors’ Office. When “Gwontaeroun Chang” (boring window), known as one of the leading debaters at Daum Agora, was accused of masterminding the Chotbul, every Agora user used the same ID as him to post at Agora boards. On August 12, the Korean Communication Commission made the decision to compel MBC “PD Suchop” (PD notebook) which aired in-depth report about the mad cow disease issue on April 28, to apologize for deliberately distorting facts and exaggerating the threat of U.S. beef. Many

---

10 From the first day of street march on May 24 till the most massive protest on June 10, the cumulative number of viewers at afreeca.com was 7.75 million, the cumulative number of channels was 17,222, and BJ(broadcasting jockeys) were 425(Seoul Shinmoon, July 31, 2008).
Netizens were dumbfounded at this and posted “Don’t apologize, no need to do so” at the free board of “PD Suchop.”

As exemplified above, these actions for disobedience and solidarity were taken in the form of so called “pilgrimage,” collective protests commenting or protest calling at specifically problematic targets. One high schooler watched police repression with water cannon through live streaming and later went out to the street with a water gun, and then got arrested. Right after this was reported at Daum Agora, a lot of protest calls were bombarded onto that police station. “Pilgrimage” was not limited to online action. The police kept arresting the Chotbul protesters who began to march down the streets late May, then one of the users at Daum Agora just suggested “dakjiangcha tour” (chicken cage car tour; a parody of the Seoul tourist bus tour with the police bus) as a way to ridicule the police by voluntarily riding on the police bus and taking and uploading photos of themselves on it.

At the dawn of June 1 there were violent clashes, with the brutal repression by more than 10,000 riot police and water cannon. A video clip of a college female student getting her head trampled by riot police was released on the internet and rapidly disseminated, and even covered by the mainstream media. The protesters became even angrier. After watching the live streaming or video clip later on, a number of netizens agreed to use ‘democracy is dead’ as a search term and to collectively visit the portal sites to search for it at the same time. It then became the no. 1 favorite search word. Additionally, the websites of the Hanara Party as well as the riot police were derisively defaced by hacking. Many netizens went around on a ‘pilgrimage’ to those websites while commenting like “Myung-bak is sleeping.” What was more interesting case of such massive hackings was that the servers of Cheongwadae (the Blue House; the Korean presidential residence) crashed due to a flood of people connecting at the same time on June 10 when almost a million gathered to protest nationwide. Around 8:30 p.m., the MC of the protest festival requested netizens who participated in the protest through live streaming to simultaneously visit Cheongwadae website to make our voice heard. In just a few minutes Cheongwadae began to suffer from the hours-long crash. Although the website seemed to be restored at 10 p.m., netizens found it just an image file of home page, then spread the image file widely with a satirical saying “disguised homepage of Cheongwadae (similar to Lee’s previous convictions)” which were accompanied by another flood of visits causing another crash.

Because of the censorship deleting the politically sensitive posts and the prosecutor’s search and seizure of private e-mails under investigation after the end of June, netizens have slowly moved their e-mail accounts, blogs, and other online activities to foreign websites like google.com, which were believed to guarantee privacy. This was known as “cyber-exile” or “exodus in cyberspace”, which can be also another case of online disobedience.

### 3.2 “The whole world is watching” right now, macro coordination, and tele-inter-action

While “pilgrimage” and hacktivism were happening online, in the streets were media tactics especially directed against the police’s violent repression. The “Citizen Journalist Collective” was formed out of discussion at a bulletin board of an SLR photo club. Its priority was the act of taking photos rather than photo journalism. In other words, they firstly tried to keep the police from violently suppressing or arresting protesters by taking photos with direct flashlights at that moment, and secondly to document those violent
scenes including the process of struggles hardly covered by the mainstream media.

Once live streaming was mobile, an additional function was real-time monitoring of the police’s violence by groups like like Citizen Journalist Collective. We have often heard warning chants shouted like “The whole world is watching”, mainly from anti-war protests at the moment the police tried to violently suppress such protests. In this occasion at the Chotbul protest, it’s not a warning, but the activity made real. Some netizens tried to figure out the name tags of the riot police to identify who was abusing their power by analyzing photos or videos captured from a live streaming. If the result was posted at Daum Agora, many netizens immediately went down to the websites relating to those policemen to criticize their abuse and demand the immediate release of the arrestees. The real-time exposure of police abuse of public power through mobile live streaming, however, made police commanders issue an order to the policemen “don’t be filmed while you’re beating people” rather than “don’t beat people.”

On the other hand, the mixed use of mobile phone and live streaming made possible a real-time macro coordination between on/off-line, internet debate boards and street media. Macro coordination via the mobile phone in the context of massive protests was famously observed in the Philippine’s ‘TXTPower’ in 2002 (de Souza e Silva 2006: 116). In the case of the Chotbul protest, it has evolved from text messages to multimedia contents, and from protest mobilizing to the real-time coordination of protest tactics. Online participants tried to figure out and collect the information about what was going on at that point from various sources including live streaming, and then send urgent information to their friends or acquaintances on the streets via the mobile phone, which means that online participants guided the next actions the street protesters would take. More often, the live streaming viewers either gave information or requested a coverage of live streaming performers. Jin Joong-kwon (Jin 2008: 174) argued “viewers not just received the transmitted reproduced image, but felt like changing the image and the reality as its origin,” by quoting the concept “telepresence” from Manovich (Manovich 2001: 164-7). In other words, internet live streaming provided the viewers not only with the experiences of feelings as if they were present at a specific place while staying far away, but also with the opportunity to intervene in the situation at that place by means of real-time feedback via the mobile phone or comments in the chatroom, asking the live streaming performers to do something as a remote coordination. But I think “telepresence” went further into “tele-interaction”, since the viewings of live streaming have been accompanied by possible online actions by viewers such as discussion or debate, donation, forwarding or re-transmission, “pilgrimage” like protest calls or commenting, and hacktivism. Thus today, the real-time tele-interactions between on/off-line via live streaming and the mobile phone made possible protest actions to change reality online as well as on the street.

4.2. Possible changes of networked protest

Beyond “street journalism” or “single person media”

As for people’s use of on/off-line media, most academics as well as mainstream journalists called it a new type of “street journalism” with some celebration, whereas they pointed out its limitation in that it had biased perspectives, emotional issue-seeking etc. just because it was conducted by non-professional journalists (Seoul Shinmoon 2008). I think such arguments, however, have some problems arising from their journalism-oriented
perspective. What was called “street journalism” such as mobile phone users, Citizen Journalist Collective, and live streaming performers not only produced news stories, but played critical roles, as described above, to monitor or control the police’s violence, to open up live discussion or to mediate each other’s actions, and to work for tele-interactions like a computer game. Another frequently-used term, “single person media”, implying one individual’s ability to produce and/or transmit information is not relevant either, because most of those who got involved in it usually either self-organized as a collective for the more powerful and effective performances or actively interacted with the audiences so that it created a kind of new way of information-producing, sharing, and even acting collectively. Therefore grassroots media practices in the Chotbul protest could be well described as media activism rather than citizen journalism since it mediated the real-time interactive common actions to intervene in and change the reality.

“Mass self-communication”

Protesters in previous protests have tried to seek direct changes with direct action and at the same time depended on mainstream media coverage to make it broadcast publicly (Rucht 2004). The Chotbul protesters tried to create their own media, while not relying on but challenging the mainstream media. “Now people not only speak, but make the voice heard in their own way” (S. Lee 2008: 59), and furthermore they tried to take and coordinate direct actions collectively through their media. This is because they have made great use of media in a way combined between the broadcast media which have a massive impact and the network media which enable two-way communication and interaction, or as Castells put it, in a form of “mass self-communication” (Castells 2007: 248).

Internet as an arena, protest as a medium

Internet spaces such as Daum Agora and internet cafes became a springboard of explosive public opinion which could not be ignored and at the same time were themselves an arena for online direct actions (hactivism). Above all, online protest actions interconnected with street protests had as much impact as protests on the street did. When Jordan analyzed every type of “mass virtual direct action,” he saw a limitation in that “those participating virtually do not take on the risk of the crowd or feel its solidarity” (2002: 132). It was the continuous on/off-line interconnection through which hacking actions during the Chotbul protests seemed to overcome such a limitation. As the internet became the arena of protests, protest in the street became an alternative medium itself. Street politics and media coverage/representation have been separate entities (Rucht 2004). Those two have been converged and the protest itself gradually becomes a medium as networked protest increased since the late 1990s. In this case, because any specific place of protest was not isolated but interconnected with an online context which then had some immediate impact, the combination of the concrete place of protest and the abstract space of online gave birth to hybrid spaces and tele-interactions. Baudrillard (1998: 200) argued that the street lost its revolutionary vitality when it was institutionalized by reproduction and reduced to a spectacle through the media. While live streaming seemed to weaken the directness of the street in that sense, it nevertheless created other “street[s]” for vivid struggles by way of these various connections and ways of actions beyond spatial limitations.
Conclusion
When social problems arise which the government or political parties can’t afford to deal with, and newspapers or broadcasting media are hardly trusted, the people pursue their own ways to solve these problems by taking direct speech and/or action to respond to the representative system, and by practicing grassroots media against the mainstream media. The networked protest for direct speech and direct action could be organized and performed through grassroots media for/as direct democracy. A diversity of grassroots media activism for spontaneous speech and participation, discussion and dissemination, tactics for confrontation in the Chotbul protest transformed both street protest and online action into a counter- and alternative medium.

People’s media activism also includes a democracy of information production. Whereas it was professional activists or journalists who produced and disseminated the information in previous protests and movements, there was now a number of people who voluntarily got involved in doing it, so that there is not much separation between the subject participating in it and the subject who was representing it or accepting the representation. Furthermore, the majority of people who were formerly isolated information-consumers were diving into contesting facts, meanings, and values with the dominant media. One may say that the “we write, you read” dogma modern journalism has had (Russell et al. 2007) or “what we write is the public opinion”, which ChoJoongDong still has, was radically and effectively challenged.

“Repression 2.0” followed, of course. In addition to severe repression of the protests, the internet has been seriously controlled by means of a real name system, the reinforcement of copyright law, consideration of creating a “cyber insult” crime, the search and seizure of private e-mails, eavesdropping and so on. This can be described as the intensive enclosure of political information commons. Particularly in the face of severe government repression, people’s media revealed certain forms of weakness simple because they were not well prepared and organized. This was clearly demonstrated by the cyber-exiles, however disobedient they were, into google.com rather than the independent alternatives such as jinbo.net or nodong.net (Korean labor network). Generally speaking, its development was limited and it could not advance through the political organizing process in part because established media activists failed to actively articulate with the new, horizontally-structured people’s media.

Nevertheless Chotbul has been continuously highlighted wherever and whenever problems with this government and representative systems have emerged - such as the GNP’s attempt to pass their media law, the Yongsan eviction and tragedy, the 1 year anniversary of Chotbul, the former President Roh’s suicide and so on. So were live streamings with online protests. Whether on-going Chotbul protests and grassroots media activism could be “social laboratories, generating new cultural practices and political imaginaries” (Juris 2005: 206) depends not only on the protests on/off-line, but on what kind of media system the people try to establish and how they are interlinked with pre-existing media and ICT movements, while politically re-constituting themselves.

References


**About the author**

Dongwon Jo is a media and information culture actuvust and a PhD candidate at the department of Cultural Studies, ChungAng University. His research interests include new media and social movements, the critique of network culture, copyright and copyfight, cultural economy, and Korean hacker culture as his doctoral research topic. He is one of planners of ‘Funfun Media Farm’, a research network to crossover media, art, culture, and ICT with social movements, and also takes part in the IP Left steering committee. He was an activist for MediaCultureAction against neoliberal globalization in 2005 till 2008, while working with KIFV (Korean Independent Film/Video Association), Jinbonet (Korean progressive network), Nodongnet (labornet), and Cultural Action. He was the policy research director at MEDIACT, a South Korean public media center, from 2002 till 2006. His roles at that time included researching the independent, alternative, and public media movements. He can be contacted at dongwon AT riseup.net