

## A Study on the Types and Processes of Information Production in Online Communities

Young-Mi Kim<sup>†</sup> · Chan Koh<sup>† †</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The power of the internet community as a social network exerts great influence on all areas of our society not only on knowledge creation and knowledge sharing but also on politics, economy, and culture. This study aims to investigate how the diffusion process of information evolves on the internet in the new environment. The focus of the study is particularly on aspects of using information and the process of information production and the types and methods of online communities. It is the goal of the study to clarify aspects of the online community as an important mediator among universal means of communication in our society. Ways of social communication are changing rapidly and thus the reasoning for this change is very important policy issues to form a social consensus.

**Key words** : Online Community, Virtual Space, Social Network Policy

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<sup>†</sup> Professor, Sangmyung University(corresponding author)

<sup>† †</sup> Professor, Seoul National University of Science and Technology

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## 1. Introduction

The power of the internet community as a social network exerts great influence on all areas of our society not only on knowledge creation and knowledge sharing but also on politics, economy, and culture. Users can easily choose a convenient service according to their purpose in the competition among service providers. Without fussy conditions, they can create, join or quit communities for their own purposes. Accordingly, many communities are created or destroyed or neglected. In short, the patterns of information use on the internet takes various types.

Using information through the internet shows a cycle of information production, distribution and consumption. In this process, negative function as well as positive function occurs simultaneously in each section as previously feared. It is claimed that standards are not clear to classify the process of information production, distribution and consumption because each process is linked complexly.

This study aims to investigate how the diffusion process of information evolves on the internet in the new environment. The focus of the study is particularly on aspects of using information and the process of information production and the types and methods of online communities. It is the goal of the study to clarify aspects of the online community as an important mediator among universal means of communication in our society.

## 2. Review of the previous discussion<sup>1)</sup>

### 2.1 Concepts and features of the internet community

Howard Rheingold, among many scholars,

defines virtual community for the first time as a social aggregation that emerges from the internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace[1]. Rheingold's definition emphasizes social elements of virtual community, while Hagel & Armstrong emphasize commercial elements. They argue 'that the profit motive will in fact create new forms of virtual communities' and propose a model to show how the possibility of commercial transactions and dynamics of communities create and maintain profits[1][3][7][9][12].

Due to the nature of the internet community where people do not meet face to face, something easily understood in real life can often get confused in the virtual space. Therefore, in the internet community, there is need to clarify who and why use it.

The internet community takes place not only in the online virtual space. Sometimes it emerges with the online and offline at the same time and sometimes online space acts as means to strengthen the community of offline.

### 2.2 Previous discussions related to dissemination of the internet information

Use of internet information in the form of a community reflects the recent trend, and especially most social scientists' research trend is characterized with analysis of growth patterns and processes of the online community. Jones(1997) claims that internet community, unlike the other simple internet meeting, must meet the following requirements[2][7][12].

First, there should be message exchanges between participants in order to make internet community keep surviving with minimal interaction. If a person sends a message on the website and

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1) This paper is an abbreviated version from some part of Project Report by Youngmi Kim, etc.(2009).

anyone does not react, the foundation for the internet community will be disappeared. Second, although two individuals can form a relationship through the interaction between themselves, more people with alias names are required to participate in community dialogue to keep diversity of communication. The abundance of cyber community can be extended by diversity of the people involved and their contribution. Third, there should be opportunities for public discussion. Although participants are not located in the same physical space, a forum for communication should be organized to allow community members to participate regularly. Fourth, membership that can be maintained for a certain period is necessary because the internet community exists for those who are keeping continuous relationship, and participants can make ongoing relationship with each other through the membership[3][4][7][13].

The internet community is not the space of symbolic presence, but the space where the meaning of participation and interaction is realized. Therefore, the internet community is the place where voluntary participation is more important and meaningful than a simple meeting, and where sense of purpose is emphasized(Yoo-Jung Kim 2005, :83-84, Youngmi Kim, 2009)[7][13].

## 2.3. Internet information distribution process and dissemination of information

### 2.3.1 Diffusion of information

In the case of South Korea, in the early days, the purposes of most online communities were sharing information. Nowadays, however, with the development of information technology, the purposes of most online communities are forming relationships. It is a wide-spread trend that online communities are used as a means of building relationships. One of the characteristics of online

communities is that they spread quickly and decline rapidly after achieving their purposes and are destroyed or neglected. The other characteristic is that the individual-oriented communities based on social network of human relationships such as mini homepages and blogs prevail throughout the country. The communities tend to develop into two directions[5][6][7][8].

One of them is a small community of friends, the other is a large group community based on anonymity. And there is another network service between the two directions, which makes a connection using SNA(Social Network Analysis). It can be developed as another type of group service after the relationship between each community groups and members is connected to the network service[4][7][10][11].

### 2.3.2 Review of empirical analysis

Studies on the internet have been performed encompassing a variety of topics from an interdisciplinary perspective in a way that was comprehensive rather than focusing on a particular topic from a perspective of particular discipline. In the view of methodology, various methods such as analyses of critical cases on which use of the internet plays an important role in performing, surveys on netizens or ordinary citizens, investigation and comparison of number of visitors, page views per visitor, and visiting hours as indicators of the activities of internet websites, has been adopted. In recent years, analysis of spread patterns of contents focusing on blogs, communities and SNS sites have been proposed[2][3][7][13].

## 3. Analysis of the information production in online communities

### 3.1. Target of analysis

For the goal of this study, a survey was conducted to investigate the process of information production in the online community. Those surveyed consist of participants in the candlelight protest in 2008 and nonparticipants. Candlelight protest is a representative example that shows information dissemination and diffusion in online space have influence on offline as well as online. Thus, distinction between participants and nonparticipants should be the basic filtering item for eligibility. In order to collect data on main items, using a structured questionnaire, web survey was carried out through a research company. The composition of the questionnaire, except demographic variables, is divided into two parts. One is related to information distribution and dissemination in online and the other is related to the use of online. Online use part consists of internet access time, degree of participation in online groups, and nature of organizations. Part related to information distribution and dissemination in online consists of route that I was encouraged to participate in the candlelight protest by others, route that I encouraged others to participate, route of receiving and sending information relevant to the candlelight protest, and route of discussion relevant to the candlelight protest. And further questions about experience of participation in the past candlelight protest, motivation and relevant knowledge were added. Routes by which information is distributed and spread were divided into offline routes(TV and newspapers, direct face to face talk and telephone conversations) and online routes.

Online routes were divided into personal communication media(e-mail, messenger, mobile phone text, etc.), community sites(café, community homepages, etc.), private media(blogs, mini homepages, etc.), portal sites(information search and news search, forum such as Daum Agora), internet news(OhmyNews, Pressian, etc.), internet broadcasts and UCC sites(YouTube,

Afreeca, Pandora TV, etc.), and websites of

<Table 1> The conceptual definition of the target network analysis

division	Inward connectivity	Outward connectivity
Weak connection	Gathering information that is open to the many and unspecified through media: gathering information	Delivering information that is open to the many and unspecified through media: delivering information
Strong connection	Obtaining information from supplier already known through media:encouraged (passive motive) : voluntary decision to participate (active motive)	Obtaining information from supplier already known through media: talk (discussion) (weak delivering) : encouraging (strong delivering)

professional organizations in each relevant areas. Sampling for data collection was based on Multistage Random Sampling method. Quota sampling was selected as a sampling method. Total number of those surveyed was 400 consisting of 300 participants related to the 2008 candlelight protest against U.S. beef imports and 100 nonparticipants. Data survey was carried out in February 2009, and data collection was performed through web survey to men and women, among open panels of Panel Insight Company, an internet panel research firm, over the age of 13 residing in Seoul and the metropolitan area. Sampling error is ±4.9% with 95% confidence<Table 1>.

### 3.2. Contents of analysis

#### 3.2.1 Characteristics of respondents

Demographic characteristics of respondents are as follows: educational level of respondents shows that university enrollment and college graduates are 56.00% and high school students and high school graduates are 32.0%. Average monthly income shows that 34.30% of respondents are less than 1

<Table 2> Demographic characteristics of respondents

characteristics	item	frequency	ratio	characteristics	item	frequency	ratio
Educational level	Under middle school graduates	5	1.3 (1.3)	Occupation	Student	120	30.0 (28.7)
	High school students and high school graduates	128	32.0 (29.7)		functional/operational	4	1.0 (1.0)
	College enrollments and college graduates	224	56.0 (56.7)		sales/service	18	4.5(5.0)
	Over graduate school enrollments	43	10.8 (12.3)		Office/technical	117	29.3(29.3)
	Total	400	100.0		management/administration	21	5.3(5.3)
Average monthly income	Under 1 million won	137	34.3 (32.0)		Professional	34	8.5(8.3)
	1million - 2million won	77	19.3 (19.3)		Self-employed	25	6.3(5.3)
	2million - 3million won	80	20.0 (20.7)		Housewife	36	9.0(9.0)
	3million - 4 million won	51	12.8 (13.3)		Unemployed	7	1.8(2.0)
	Over 4 million won	55	13.8 (14.7)		Other	18	4.5(6.0)
	Total	400	100.0	Total	400	100.0	
Live with parents	Yes	213	53.3 (53.3)	Age	13~19	66	16.5 (16.0)
	No	187	46.8 (46.7)		20~29	89	22.3 (23.3)
	Total	400	100.0		30~39	91	22.8 (22.7)
Married	Yes	181	45.3 (44.7)		40~49	90	22.5 (22.0)
	No	219	54.8 (55.3)		Over 50	64	16.0 (16.0)
	Total	400	100.0		Total	400	100.0
Have children	Yes	164	90.6 (89.6)		* Note: Figures in parentheses are only for candlelight protest.		
	No	17	9.4 (10.4)				
	total	181	100.0				

million won and income level of the rest is surveyed similar. The reason why the proportion of respondents with average monthly income of less than 1 million won is relatively high is because 40% of respondents are 10s and 20s. Ratio of

occupation shows that students and office/technical workers are, respectively, 30.00% and 29.3%. Family organizations show that 53.30% are living with parents, 44.70% are married, and 90.60% are living with children. Unlike the response to the

questionnaire related to living with parents and marriage, response of Have no children is only 9.40% in response to the questionnaire related to living with children. The cause of very low ratio like this seems to be resulted from the fact that ratio of response to the questionnaire related to children is only 45% of all 400 respondents and only married respondents made response to the questionnaire related to children. In the survey of the study, sampling work was carried out according to the Multi Stage Random Sampling by assigning quota based on the candlelight protest participation, gender, and age, therefore, it cannot be said that the general characteristics of the respondents can directly represent the characteristics of the population. However, demographic characteristics of whole respondents and demographic characteristics of the candlelight protest participants appear to be no significant difference, hence, it is considered that the consistency between total sample and sub-samples is maintained. The results of demographic characteristics of respondents are presented in <Table 2>.

### 3.2.2 Gathering and delivering information

The result from asking how much a respondent knows about the whole context of the candlelight protest such as cause and issues of assembly, or process and plan, shows that 21.10% are I don't know.(I don't know definitely + I don't know well) and 78.90% are I know.(I know very well. + I know.). It means that respondents' awareness of the candlelight protest is relatively high. High awareness about the context of the candlelight protest is basically affected by gathering and delivering related information. Furthermore, gathering and delivering information are more directly related to the distribution of information and they can be distinguished into gathering information from the outside and delivering

information to the outside. Even if in case of the same respondent, one of the key reason why there can be difference between the route to gather information related to the candlelight protest and the route to deliver relevant information mainly due to the individual internet media. For example, it is not easy for such media as portal sites, internet newspapers and internet broadcasts to transfer relevant information because they have unsuitable structures to transfer relevant information compared to community sites and personal communication media<Table 3>.

<Table 3> Routes of gathering relevant information of the candlelight protest: rankings #1-3 are integrated.

item	frequency	ratio
Personal communication media such as e-mail, messenger, mobile phone text message	82	7.0
Community sites such as café, communication homepages	127	10.8
Personal media such as blogs, mini homepages	81	6.9
Information search and news search of portal sites, forum(Daum Agora etc.)	240	20.4
Internet newspapers (OhMyNews, Pressians, etc.)	208	17.7
Internet broadcasts/UCC sites (YouTube, Afreeca, Pandora TV, etc.)	89	7.6
Sites of relevant professional organizations	29	2.5
TV broadcasts or newspapers	229	19.5
Face to face talks or phone calls	92	7.8
Total	1,177	100

The results of the above discussion to ensure major media or methods used in the process of distribution and diffusion of information on the internet with target practice of the candlelight protest are divided into case of integrated rankings #1-3 and case of ranking #1. And then media with relatively higher proportion of response in each

case are extracted and summarized in <Table 4>.

<Table 4> Summary of results of analysis of technical statistics on the distribution and diffusion on the internet

item		Proportion of response		
		ranking #1	ranking #2	
Media that affected on decision of participation in candlelight protest	Integrated rankings	Portal sites	TV broadcasts or newspaper	
	Ranking #1	Portal sites	TV broadcasts or newspaper	
Encouragement	Encouraged	Integrated rankings	Face to face talks or phone calls	Community sites
		Ranking #1	Face to face talks or phone calls	Community sites
	Encouraging	Integrated rankings	Face to face talks or phone calls	Personal communication media
		Ranking #1	Face to face talks or phone calls	Personal communication media
Gathering and delivering information	Gathering information	Integrated ranking	Portal sites	TV broadcasts or newspaper
		Ranking #1	TV broadcasts or newspaper	Portal sites
	Delivering information	Integrated ranking	Face to face talks or phone calls	Personal communication media
		Ranking #1	Face to face talks or phone calls	Personal communication media
Discussion	Integrated ranking	Face to face talks or phone calls	Personal communication media	
	Ranking #1	Face to face talks or phone calls	Personal communication media	

(1) The major media or methods that affected on decision of participation in the candlelight protest based on personal judgments are portal sites(information search and news search, and forum) and TV broadcasts or newspapers.

(2) In the case of participation in candlelight protest by encouragement, media primarily used for encouragement are face to face talks, phone calls and community sites(cafe, club website, etc.).

(3) Media or methods primarily used when encouraging others or outside to participate in the candlelight protest is face to face talks, phone calls and personal communication media(e-mail, messenger, mobile phone text message, etc.).

(4) Major routes of gathering information related to the candlelight protest are portal sites, TV broadcasts and newspapers.

(5) Media or methods primarily used when delivering information related to the candlelight protest is face to face talks and personal communication media.

(6) Media or methods primarily used when discussing topics related to the candlelight protest is face to face talks and personal communication media.

The key characteristics of the discussion above are outlined as follows. Firstly, offline media such as face to face talks, phone calls, TV broadcasts, and newspapers and offline linking methods still have strong influence. Previous surveys and researches evaluate relative influence or degree of utilization of individual media targeting internet media, whereas this study evaluates relative influence or degree of utilization of individual media targeting offline media as well as internet media. In particular, when discussions on the internet are connected to real activities in the offline as in the case of the candlelight protest, the influence of offline media still seems to work seriously. Secondly, among the internet media, the influence of personal communication media, portal sites and community sites is relatively higher than other

&lt;Table 5&gt; route of obtaining relevant information according to experience of participation in candlelight protest

item	Experience of participation in assembly						
	Integrated ranking			1 rank			
	Experienced	Inexperienced	Total	Experienced	Inexperienced	Total	
Personal communication media such as e-mail, messenger, mobile phoned text message	Frequency	63	19	82	27	8	35
	Route obtaining information %	76.8	23.2		77.1	22.9	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	21.0	19.0		9.0	8.0	
	Total %	15.8	4.8	20.5	6.8	2.0	8.8
Community sites such as café, communication homepages	Frequency	110	17	127	41	4	45
	Route obtaining information %	86.6	13.4		91.1	8.9	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	36.7	17.0		13.7	4.0	
	Total %	27.5	4.3	31.8	10.3	1.0	11.3
Personal media such as blogs, mini homepages	Frequency	73	8	81	13	1	14
	Route obtaining information %	90.1	9.9		92.9	7.1	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	24.3	8.0		4.3	1.0	
	Total %	18.3	2.0	20.3	3.3	0.3	3.5
Information search and news search of portal sites, forum (Daum, Agora etc.)	Frequency	181	59	240	72	22	94
	Route obtaining information %	75.4	24.6		76.6	23.4	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	60.3	59.0		24.0	22.0	
	Total %	45.3	14.8	60.0	18.0	5.5	23.5
Internet newspapers (Oh My News, Pressians, etc.)	Frequency	149	59	208	42	14	56
	Route obtaining information %	71.6	28.4		75.0	25.0	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	49.7	59.0		14.0	14.0	
	Total %	37.3	14.8	52.0	10.5	3.5	14.0
Internet broadcasts/UCC sites (YouTube, Afreeca, Pandora TV, etc.)	Frequency	68	21	89	6	3	9
	Route obtaining information %	76.4	23.6		66.7	33.3	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	22.7	21.0		2.0	3.0	
	Total %	17.0	5.3	22.3	1.5	0.8	2.3
Sites of relevant professional organizations	Frequency	25	4	29	4		4
	Route obtaining information %	86.2	13.8		100.0		
	Experience of participation in assembly %	8.3	4.0		1.3		
	Total %	6.3	1.0	7.3	1.0		1.0
TV broadcasts or newspapers	Frequency	148	81	229	71	46	117
	Route obtaining information %	64.6	35.4		60.7	39.3	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	49.3	81.0		23.7	46.0	
	Total %	37.0	20.3	57.3	17.8	11.5	29.3
Face to face talks or phone calls	Frequency	67	25	92	24	2	26
	Route obtaining information %	72.8	27.2		92.3	7.7	
	Experience of participation in assembly %	22.3	25.0		8.0	2.0	
	Total %	16.8	6.3	23.0	6.0	0.5	6.5
total	Frequency	300	100	400	300	100	400
	total %	75.0	25.0	100.0	75.0	25.0	100.0



media. The influence of recent internet media such as blogs, internet newspapers, internet broadcasts, and UCC still does not match that of existing internet media.

### 3.2.3 Gathering and delivering information on the internet

The results of analysis to probe whether there is a difference of media or method of gathering information related to the candlelight protest between participants group and nonparticipants group are presented in <Table 5>. They are divided into case of integrated rankings #1-3 and case of ranking #1. Analysis on media and methods of gathering information according to experience of participation in the candlelight protest can be drawn from integrated rankings #1-3 in <Table 5>. Respondents with experience of participation in assembly gather information mainly from information search and news search on portal sites, the highest portion of 60.3%, and internet newspapers, TV broadcasts or newspapers, respectively 49.70% and 49.3%. In contrast, in inexperienced group, TV broadcasts or newspapers form the highest of 81.00%, and newspapers and portal sites occupy relatively high proportion. As the result shown in the case of integrated rankings #1-3, participants group in the candlelight protest gathers information mostly through portal sites, whereas nonparticipants group mostly through offline TV broadcasts or newspapers. Concerning ranking #1 media or methods used to gather information related to the candlelight protest, both participants group and nonparticipant group use TV broadcasts or newspaper, portal sites, and internet newspapers relatively more. However, the proportion of response that the primary media to gather information related to the candlelight protest are TV broadcasts or newspapers is higher in nonparticipant group(46.00%) than in participants group(23.7%).

To compare routes of delivering information related to the candlelight protest to outside or others between participants group and nonparticipants group, results of analysis are divided into case of integrated rankings #1-3 and case of ranking #1 as presented in <Table 5>. Results of analysis on integrated ranking #1-3 show that participants group use mostly face to face talks or phone calls, 72.40% of total respondents. Next, personal communication methods are 51.4%, community sites 44.8%, and personal media 40.0%. They show relatively high ratio of utilization in delivering information related to the candlelight protest. In nonparticipants group, offline media and methods such as face to face talks and phone calls are 78.60% of the total responses, the highest level. And the next is personal communication methods with 54.8%, community sites 45.2%, and personal media 26.2%. As for the type of media primarily used to deliver relevant information, no significant differences can be found overall between the candlelight protest participants group and nonparticipants group. However, in the use of personal media, participants group shows relatively high utilization compared to nonparticipants group.

## 4. Implications of analysis

To sum up the results of this study is as follows. In the results shown in the process of information generation, offline media such as face to face talks or phone calls, TV broadcasts or newspapers and offline connection methods still have strong influences. Previous surveys and researches evaluate relative influence or degree of utilization of each media targeting internet media only. In contrast with that, this study evaluates relative influence or degree of utilization of each media targeting not only internet media but also offline media. In particular, when discussions on

the internet are connected to real actions in the offline, the influence of offline media still seems to work seriously. Secondly, among the internet media, the influence of personal communication media, portal sites, and community sites is relatively higher compared to other media. The influence of recently appeared media on the internet such as blogs, internet newspapers, and internet broadcasts/UCC is not yet equal to that of the existing internet media.

The process of gathering information and decision-making is carried out mainly through large media such as portal sites, newspapers, and broadcasts, whereas actions like delivery of information, discussion, being encouraged by others, and encouraging others are carried out by easy media for individuals to access such as face to face talks, phone calls, and personal communication media. It seems that personal media, internet newspapers, and internet broadcasts that are received much attention actually do not play a major role in the process of information dissemination. Inferring from these results, traditional media like newspapers and broadcasts are still valid for individuals to gather and access information and, in addition, portal sites are now no less influential than traditional media. The routes for individuals to distribute information are personalized media. Face to face talks are still the most frequent and important media. In addition, personal communication media like mobile phone text message and messenger are grown as influential media. Therefore, the current distribution of the information is in the interaction of both online and offline. The initial process of obtaining information is primarily carried out through media with weak links such as portal sites, newspapers, and broadcasts, whereas subsequent process of the information diffusion is carried out through media with strong links such as personal communication media, and community sites, and face to face talks.

## 5. Conclusion

All citizens can raise the issue about policy of the government and claim their rights in public assembly through sharing knowledge, information and communication beyond age, gender, and class on the basis of the internet space. Participation of citizens is the foundation of democracy. That is, democracy is established and operated with participation of citizens. Participation of citizens must go beyond just a mere exercising their right to vote in a few elections. It must include standing himself as a candidate to elections, helping suitable candidates to be elected, and criticizing and watching the policies and activities of elected representatives.

In other words, participation of citizen is very important for representative democracy to be able to operate normally. But, in reality, participation of citizens is limited to their right to vote, and in addition, after the election, there is no appropriate way of political participation to criticize or restrict policies or activities of representatives. Therefore, to activate democracy and solve the problems of representative democracy, political participation of individuals should be activated more. Another reason for the importance of direct participation and action is that citizens can feel and learn the reality vividly through direct participation in public assembly. It can be said that throughout 1 year long period of candlelight protest, changes in consciousness of many middle and high school students, the main axis of participation, arose considerable social significance. Teenagers who were indifferent to all about politics in the past, now discuss actively on political topics and issues and talk about the importance of government and politics, showing that no longer they remain apart from politics. Experience of democracy through direct participation and practice will function as a social basis that enables to present a more sophisticated framework of democracy.

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- [www.voiceofpeople.org](http://www.voiceofpeople.org)
- [www.peoplepower21.org](http://www.peoplepower21.org)



Young-Mi Kim

1986 Sangmyung Womens  
University (BA, Public  
Administration)

1988 Hankook University of  
Foreign Studies (MA,  
Public Administration)

1992 Hankook University of Foreign Studies  
(Ph.D, Public Administration )

1995- Sangmyung University, Professor

2007-2008 Korean Association for Regional  
Information Policy(Vice President)

Interest areas : digital divide, e-government,  
IT Service

E-Mail: young@smu.ac.kr



Chan Koh

2008 Seoul National University  
(Ph.D., Economics)

1991 Kyunghee University  
(Ph.D., Electronic  
Engineering)

1983 Yonsei University  
(M.S., Computer Science )

1974 Kyunghee University  
(B.S., Mechanical Engineering )

1974-1978 Military Service: Naval officer,  
ROK Navy

2005-Present Adjunct Professor, Helsinki  
Metropolia University of AS, Finland

2006-2009 Member of a board of directors,  
The Korea Game Industry Agency, Korea

1983-Present Professor, Seoul National  
University of Science & Technology

E-Mail: chankoh@snut.ac.kr