Analysis of Fake News in the 2017 Korean Presidential Election

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze 1) who created and distributed fake news, 2) the distribution channels of fake news, 3) who fake news has targeted, and 4) the effects on voting and the impact of fake news on Korean politics.

In South Korea, fake news was mainly created by candidates or election campaigns. The reason is that in the wake of the impeachment of President Park Guen Hye, all the political parties in Korea used fake news as a means of mobilizing supporters for each of their candidates or parties to gain an advantage in situations involving political divisions and confrontations between the pro-impeachment, progressive young generation and anti-impeachment, conservative senior generation.

Voters' media usage patterns were polarized through social network services (SNS) media and television. Fake news was mostly received through these two media outlets. According to the spreading structure of fake news in Korea, the younger generation generally uses SNS posts intended for unspecified individuals, and the older generation uses closed SNS like KakaoTalk or Naver's BAND. In the end, it is typically characteristic of the older generation to spread fake news through existing offline human networks.

In the 2017 presidential election, fake news has been confirmed to have the effect of mobilizing supporters for each political party. In the presidential election, an increase in voter turnout was confirmed among those in their 20s and those in their

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60s or older. Evidently, fake news influenced the election of Moon Jae-In. The influence of fake news is expected to grow further as ideological polarization and consequent political polarization continues to intensify in South Korea.

Keywords: fake news, 2017 Korean presidential election, social media, political polarization

In the presidential election of Korea in 2017, fake news appeared as a major issue. Fake news had already received a great deal of attention all over the world after the US presidential election in 2016. Fake news was reported to have had a considerable impact on the election results of the recent US presidential election, as well as on the form of election campaigns. The results of the US election were influenced through new SNS campaigns (Lee & Joo, 2017).

The US presidential election in 2016 and the Korean presidential election in 2017 have common phenomena, such as changes in the media environment, media polarization, and political polarization. Fake news has also emerged as a major issue in both elections.

The candlelight vigils to support the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye began in October 2016. The National Assembly approved the impeachment motion on December 9. Later, rallies supporting or opposing the impeachment were held weekly by the liberal and conservative campaigns until the Constitutional Court upheld the president's impeachment on March 10, 2017. Fake news emerged as a major issue in Korean politics until the presidential election on May 9, 2017.

With the deepening post-truth phenomenon, fake news is growing. Post-truth is a philosophical and political concept that refers to "the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth" and the "circuitous slippage between facts or alt-facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth" (Jang, 2018, 92-93). Fueled by emotive arguments rather than fact checking, it was a phrase that tried to capture the gut-instinct, anti-establishment politics that swept Donald Trump and Brexit supporters to victory. The post-truth phenomenon is becoming more influential in the process of generating public opinion by appealing to individual emotions even if the information is false or fake rather than objective facts.

Disbelief in the existing media has deflected expectations of the US and British elections. Currently, words and actions appeal to individual emotions rather than facts. Political polarization with media polarization is fueling this post-truth phenomenon.

This paper analyzes the fake news phenomenon that emerged in the South Korean presidential election, focusing on who created and distributed fake news, the purpose of making fake news, the form of fake news, distribution networks, and the influence of fake news on voting participation. Finally, the purpose of this paper is to analyze how fake news is affecting and will continue to affect South Korean politics in the future.

Literature Review

Fake news is a journalistic phenomenon in terms of terminology, but it is actually a phenomenon of political communication that appears in social media environments. This popular response, as evidenced by the number of shares and comments, shows that fake news is just going beyond fun, to some kind of political social supportive behavior or collective action.

As fake news expands its influence in Korea, the concept and studies related to fake news are actively being conducted. Looking at recent studies, fake news can be defined as news that purports to be based on facts or information, when this information is not actually true, for political or economic benefits (Oh, et al., 2017). It is also "false information" (hoax) or "intentional misinformation" spread through traditional news media or social media (Hyundai Economic Research Institute, 2017), and "political manipulation with intent" (Huang, 2017).

The consumption of content such as fake news is a process of selecting one out of various options and is similar to a kind of zero-sum game. Much research shows that confirmation bias has the greatest effect on the process of selection (Hwang & Kwon, 2017). However, whether an individual accepts this conspiracy or not is largely influenced by the individual belief system, i.e., the degree of personal confirmation bias (Zhu et al., 2010; Frenda, et al., 2011). Wrong information results in inaccurate beliefs.

People tend to hold on to inaccurate beliefs. This vicious circle has contributed to collective polarization (Garrett & Weeks, 2013).

In politically sensitive times, such as election periods, fake news can exert more influence on proponents' propensity to mobilize. It amplifies the logic of each of the election campaigns by dividing the people into sides both during election periods and other times.

The acceptance of fake news ultimately undermines the development of political and social consensus and weakens the conformity of the political process, which threatens the democratic framework. In a way, fake news causes group polarization on political issues. This is because individuals using the Internet tend to be part of a kind of closed network consisting of only those who agree with their tendencies (Huang, 2017).

Brownstein (2007) pointed out that as the Internet became a political media force, the political forces utilized separate media on the Internet, which in turn led to an explosion of partisan warfare. As the influence of the Internet on politics increases, it has had a significant influence on political polarization, and it leads to further polarization of public opinion as the press coverage is added to the efforts of each party (Glynn et al., 2004).

Fake news in the new media environment also helps to make individuals become collectively polarized and brings about ideological polarization. Each extreme uses fake news to mobilize support from the public. We could imagine that for these reasons, fake news has become widespread in Korea.

Sunstein (2011/2009, 2015/2005) sees this phenomenon as a group polarity. The reason for this phenomenon is that people have more access to information that strengthens their beliefs among a variety of information. In the field of psychology and communication, this homophily formation process is conceptualized as a confirmatory bias. In this paper, fake news is also viewed as a result of confirmation bias in the ideological and political orientation of voters, resulting in group polarization.

Methodology

In this paper we examine the growth of fake news and its impact on the 2017 South Korean presidential election. The paper aims to analyze the characteristics of fake news in South Korea's 2017 presidential election, and to analyze the impact of fake news on election results. To achieve this goal, the process of manufacturing, distributing and spreading fake news was analyzed first. In addition, the mobilization effect of fake news on voters' voting behavior was analyzed by voter turnout.

The fake news in this paper was classified as fake news by Seoul National University Fact Check Research Institute. Fake news articles and videos were classified as fake news according to guidelines under the Public Official Election Act by the National Election Commission also including the fake news that the police judged to be fake news and launched an investigation. Based on this fake news, the producers, motivations, and distribution channels of news were analyzed.

Regarding the influence of fake news, the analysis was based on the trend of Google's search volume and the perception and behavior of voters in a survey of fake news conducted by Chungnam National University and the Korean Political Science Association on the extent to which fake news was encountered, shared, and spread among voters during the election period.

The political divide and polarization are also linked to the effect of vote mobilization. The effect of voter mobilization in the 2017 presidential election was measured by analyzing voter turnout rate by age.

Results

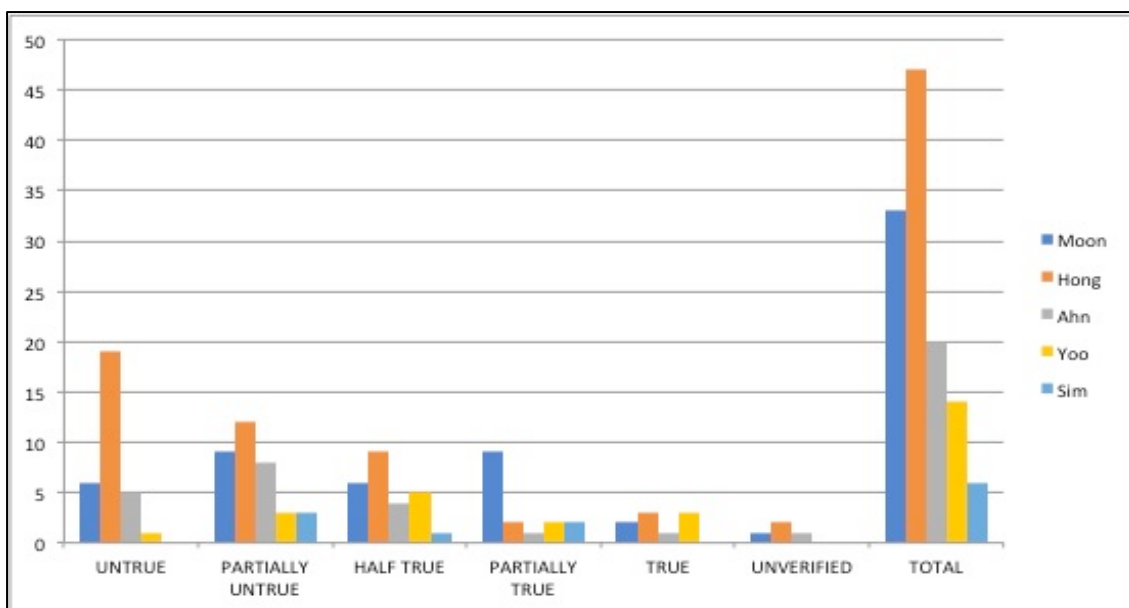### Fake News Writers and Motivation in the 2017 Korea Presidential Election

The writers of fake news during the Korean presidential election often created and distributed fake news as a means to tie together people who are close. The distribution of smartphone messages or tabloid types of messages through online messengers such as KakaoTalk and closed social media space such as Naver's BAND was active. In order to add more persuasiveness to this process, fake news headlines and format are close enough to ordinary articles to look like real news at first glance.

They even cited made up non-existent organizations and sources for "interviews with overseas academics." The content, however, includes clear lies and distortions of fact, along with false reports defaming specific individuals.

The fake news environment was also characterized by the production, expansion, and re-production by presidential candidates, political parties, and the media. According to the SNU Factcheck Institute (Seoul National University's Institute of Media Information), which was established by Seoul National University, out of 177 fact checks conducted on 144 issues, the five leading presidential candidates accounted for 92% of the total. In addition, 120 of the fact checks (67.8%) found that untrue statements had been made by politicians in their own comments during TV debates and field campaigns.

Figure 1

Fact Check Results by Candidate

Source: Seoul National University Fact Check Institute (2017)

Of the presidential candidates' comments that were rated, 15 (63.6%) out of 33 for Moon Jae-in and 40 (85.1%) out of 47 for Hong Joon-pyo were rated as Fully False, Half False, and Partially False. There were 17 (85%) out of 20 for Ahn Cheol-soo, 9 cases (64.3%) out of 14 for Yoo Seung-min, and 4 (66.6%) out of 6 for Sim Sang-jung. Candidate Hong Jun-pyo of the Liberty Korea party had the highest percentage of fact-

checked statements that turned out to be false.

Besides the presidential candidates, most conservative groups that send the fake news attended the Taegeukgi, pro-Park, rallies.[2] The information and fake news sent to those who attended the Taegeukgi rallies were led by a newly created conservative group after the impeachment of President Park.

In April 2017, the SBS program Geugeosi algo sipda reported that those who generated fake news had a strong influence at Taegeukgi rallies. Most fake news distribution media were newly created just before and after the Taegeukgi rallies. These distribution media were mainly located in Seoul. In fact, many right-wing groups using the same address were reporting exaggerated false stories that can be classified as fake news. These media, through conspiracy theories, have provoked the fear of North Korea and communism among the elderly participating in Taegeukgi rallies, making them hostile to the media, the Constitutional Court, and citizens who criticize former President Park Guen-hye (Park & Do, 2017).

After the impeachment of former President Park Guen-hye, a large number of conservative groups formed and created fake news because they perceived that the impeachment worked against the conservative candidate. Daily access to conservative groups such as www.todayhumor.co.kr and http://www.ilbae.com had surged into the millions. In addition, soon after the impeachment, the Cheongwadae (the Blue House, the Korean presidential residence) chief of staff was found to have established and supported conservative groups against the impeachment through the Federation of Korean Industries (Yoo & Park, 2017).

Therefore, it can be said that the conservatives produced fake news for the purpose of spreading the unfairness of the impeachment and strengthening its influence even after the presidential election.

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[2] Taegukgi refers to the Korean national flag. The Taegukgi rallies (Korean: 태극기 집회), also known as Pro-Park rallies (Korean: 친박집회), were a series of counter-candlelight rallies supporting the former president of South Korea Park Geun-hye. The Taegeukgi protestors, also referred to as Taegeukgi crowds (Korean: 태극기 부대), got this name because they vehemently swung or wore South Korean flags (the Taegeukgi) during rallies.

Based on these cases, we can find clues in political and ideological reasons by analyzing the main motives for fake news writing in the presidential election in South Korea. This is because consumers of fake news, with a politically ideologically synchronized purpose, showed a voluntary interest in providing alternative information, different from what was presented by mainstream politicians and intellectuals. In particular, the political communication situation encourages political conflicts to be fiercely developed and strengthens the beliefs of those with extreme positions. Then the information consumers fall into biased information consumption in which they select and recognize only the information that suits their tendency (Kim, 2017).

This is because consumers of fake news, with a politically ideological purpose, showed a voluntary interest in providing alternative views, different from what was presented by mainstream politicians. In particular, the political situation encourages political discourse to be developed based on the users' preferences, which strengthen extreme views. Subsequently, such users naturally consume biased information that selects and recognizes only information that suits their preferences (Kim, 2017).

Fake News Cases in the 2017 Korea Presidential Election

As a result of the joint check of newspapers and broadcasting, it was revealed that Hong Joon-pyo, the conservative candidate from the Liberty Korea party, lied the most among presidential candidates. Seoul National University Press Information Institute released the results of the SNU fact check conducted with 12 media outlets during the presidential election period. The analysis revealed that 31 of the 47 statements candidate Hong Joo-pyo made that were subject to the fact check were rated as "false" or "almost false." A typical false statement is that, "The green algae phenomenon of rivers is due to sewage inflows and climate change (not because of the four rivers)" or "The Roh Moo-hyun government received 800 billion won (from chaebols)." Meanwhile, local councilors and the presidential campaign policy advisors to the conservative Liberty Korea Party were accused of distributing false information that Hong had about Ahn (Keum, 2017).

In the week of the election, citing an unnamed ministry official, SBS TV reported that the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries and Moon agreed on postponing

refloating the ferry, in exchange for Moon expanding the ministry if he becomes president. SBS deleted articles and delivered an apology during its 8pm news the next day, claiming the report was "not intended to exert influence on the election or slander a certain candidate" (Kim & Park, 2017). However, rival contenders Ahn Cheol-soo of the minor opposition People's Party and Hong Joon-pyo of the conservative Liberty Korea Party demanded Moon's withdrawal and a parliamentary investigation of the allegation.

Prosecutors raided the offices and homes of two members of a minor opposition party as part of an investigation into false allegations they made against President Moon Jae-in's son. During the election campaign, the People's Party claimed that his son, Moon Joon-yong, was unfairly hired at the Korea Employment Information Service in late 2006 when Moon was a senior presidential secretary.

Table 1

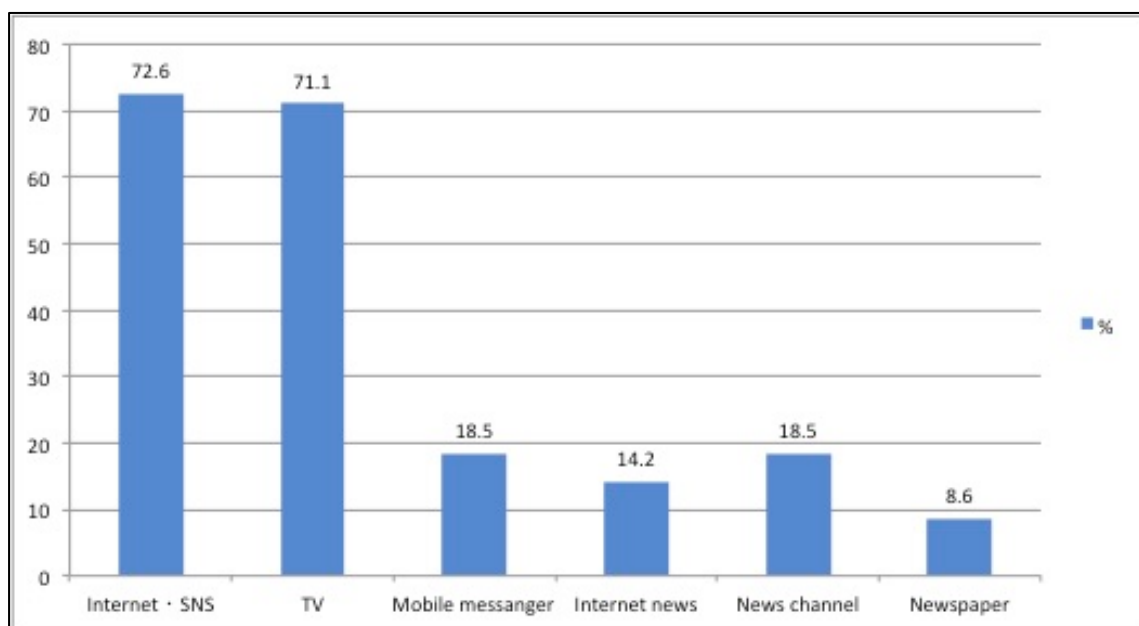*Fake News in Korean presidential election 2017 (identified by NEC)*

Fake News Publisher	Fake News Content	Source
Terrestrial Broadcasting	SBS Suspension, SBS Ministry of Maritime Affairs	SBS News
Presidential Candidate	The municipal government received 80 billion won (from the chaebols) The US-Japan defense treaty automatically intervenes in the event of war, but it is not a treaty.	Debate and various campaign sites
Member of Jeonnam Provincial Assembly	Candidate Ahn Chul-soo is overwhelmingly supported in the National People's Exit Survey of Overseas Koreans in the US and China	KakaoTalk
The member of People's Party	The fabricated allegation against Moon's son	Press conference

Diffuse Structure of Fake News in the 2017 Korea Presidential Election

The National Election Commission Korea (NEC) reported that fake news during the 19th presidential election was found to have increased five times more than the 18th presidential election four years ago. Korean voters were most likely to receive fake news via the Internet and SNS (72.6%), and TV (71.1%), with other sources including mobile messenger (18.5%), news channels (18.5%), and Internet newspapers (14.2%).

Figure 2

Fake News Media Consumed by Korean Voters

Source: Korean Political Science Association (2017)

The reason TV accounts for a high percentage is because candidates used a lot of fake news through debates on television. In addition, news channels and Internet newspapers reported the candidates' remarks in the form of news or articles without verifying them. This trend is also seen in the US. The traditional TV news media is reporting fake news without commentary.

Table 2

Major Social Media Usage by Age

		Kakao Story	Facebook	Naver's BAND	Instagram	Naver cafe	Naver blog
sex	male	67.9	64.7	42.6	23.7	11.3	10.5
	female	74.4	57.9	41.5	23.1	10.8	10.8
age	6-19	66.7	74.8	24.7	30.1	10.1	8.5
	20's	64.5	81.8	31.5	36.9	11.9	12.3
	30's	72.5	67.6	41.4	24.7	12.1	13.7
	40's	77.9	48.8	54.0	15.3	11.1	10.2
	50's	73.8	33.7	57.6	9.8	9.9	7.5
	60's	71.7	33.2	49.3	10.0	8.1	6.2
	70's	66.0	42.6	41.9	14.8	8.4	5.6

Source: Joo et al. (2016)

According to the Internet Usage Survey of KISA (Korea Internet & Security Agency) in October 2016, social media was widely used by people of all ages. However, which social media services are mainly used by people in a certain age group differ, and the phenomenon of social media usage behavior by generations is clearly observed.

Pre-teens, teens, and those in their 20s were shown to use Facebook and Instagram. Those in their 40s and 50s used Kakao Story and Facebook but predominantly used BAND. BAND was used as a channel for the distribution of fake news aimed at those in their 40s to 60s.

Figure 2 and Table 2 show that SNS and TV platforms were used extensively as the biggest channel for receiving fake news, and media users were polarized by different age groups. The youth prefer to use social networking sites, while the elderly are spreading fake news through closed SNS (KakaoTalk, BAND) as an extension of existing offline human networks. A high proportion of elderly people were among the anti-impeachment participants in the Taegeukgi rallies and are supporters of the conservative camp. Unlike open social media such as Facebook, Naver's BAND has

been able to create an environment that is easier to achieve group polarization with closed social media for social networking with acquaintances.

Impact of Fake News in the 2017 Korea Presidential Election

In Korea, interacting with fake news is becoming a common phenomenon. The Korean Academic Multimode Open Survey 2019[3] found that 65.9% of people have been exposed to fake news in the past three months. Only 34.1% said they had no contact experience. By age, 78.1% of respondents ages 18-29 and 41.2% age 60 or older had been exposed to fake news, with the younger generation having almost twice as much contact as the older generation.

Many respondents (63.9%) get fake news from people around them, while 57.1% of respondents get fake news from portal sites, and 56.9% from SNS. By age, respondents over the age of 60 have the highest rate of access to fake news from people around them, while the younger generation has the highest ratio of portal sites and SNS. In Korea, fake news is not only shared through SNS and the Internet, but also through face-to-face contact with others.

Regarding the influence of fake news, 87.7% of the respondents perceive it as a negative influence on election results, and 84.5% feel it amplifies conflicts or disgust among groups and generations. This situation suggests that fake news is affecting the election results as well.

However, only 38.2% of respondents who received fake news check additional information to verify its accuracy, and the remaining 61.8% do not check any additional information. Only 21% of people express their opinions to people around them or on social media about fake news. In addition, only a small proportion (6.7%) had contact with fact-checking news, and 57.4% of them had contact with news once. The percentage of people who did not receive any fact-check news was 36%. In particular, 56.1% of people in age 60 and older had never encountered it. Voters recognize that fake news is being accepted in Korea without additional information checks or fact-checks, and that fake news has influenced election results.
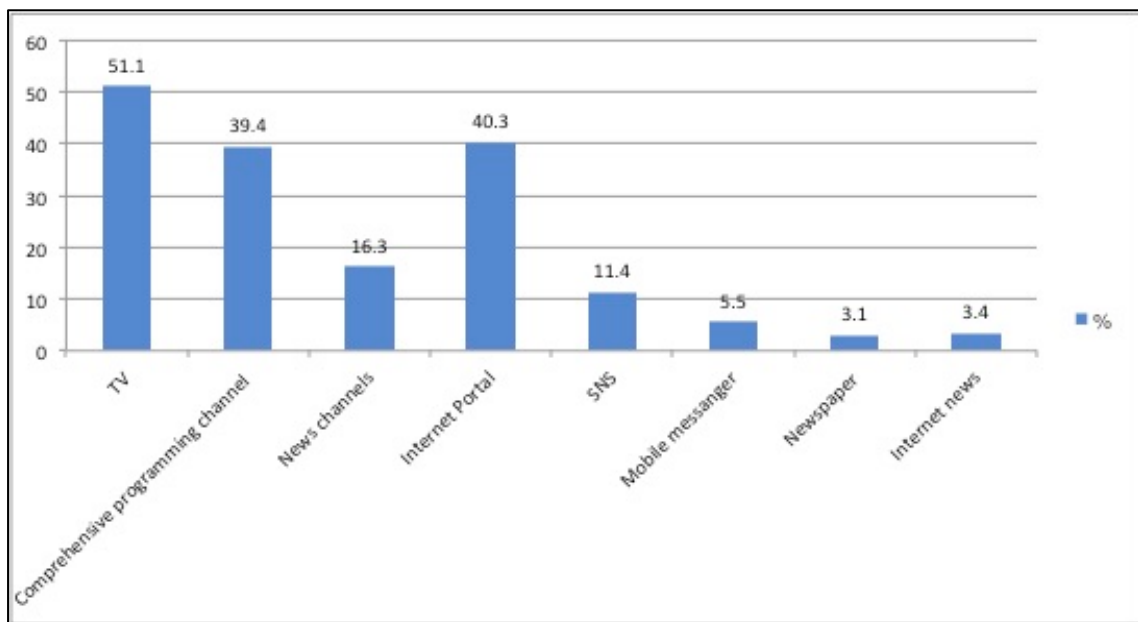
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[3] Chungnam National University's Center for Asian Public Opinion Research & Collaboration Initiative conducted a nationwide survey of 1,500 people aged 18 or older, from May 14, 2019 to July 13, 2019. The response rate was 65.1%. The complete data can be found at http://cnukamos.com/eng/sub2/menu_1.php

The Media Research Center of the Korea Press Foundation conducted a survey of 1,092 voters during the 19th presidential election. Eighty-eight percent of people who have seen fact-checking articles answered that the fake news issue was "serious" during the presidential election this year, including 43% who said it was "very serious."

In the 2017 Korean presidential election, voters made the most use of TV (51.1 %) for fact checking fake news (Figure 3). Next was SNS (40.3%). Comprehensive programming channels (CPC)[4] (39.4%) were also used. Looking at the pattern of using fact checking media among Korean voters, a high percentage of people used existing media such as TV and general programming channels. In comparison, SNS was lower. Moreover, the rate of the use of fact checking media was significantly lower than the rate of fake news. Korean voters appeared to be passive in fact checking. In particular, SNS users were less likely to fact check fake news they had accepted.
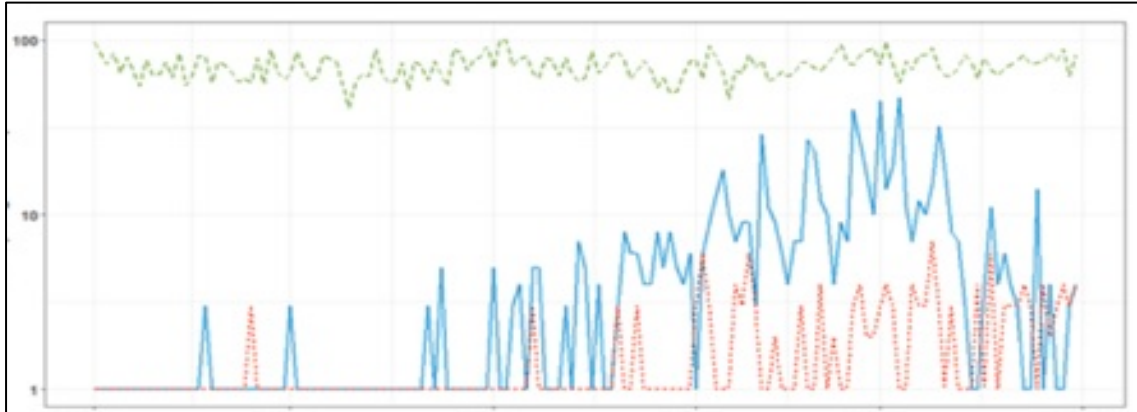
Figure 3

Fact Checking Media of Korean Voters

Source: The Korean Political Science Association (2017)

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[4] These channels are known as jongpyeon and broadcast all genres, including news, drama, culture, entertainment and sports, through cable TV, satellite broadcasting, and IPTV.

Figure 4

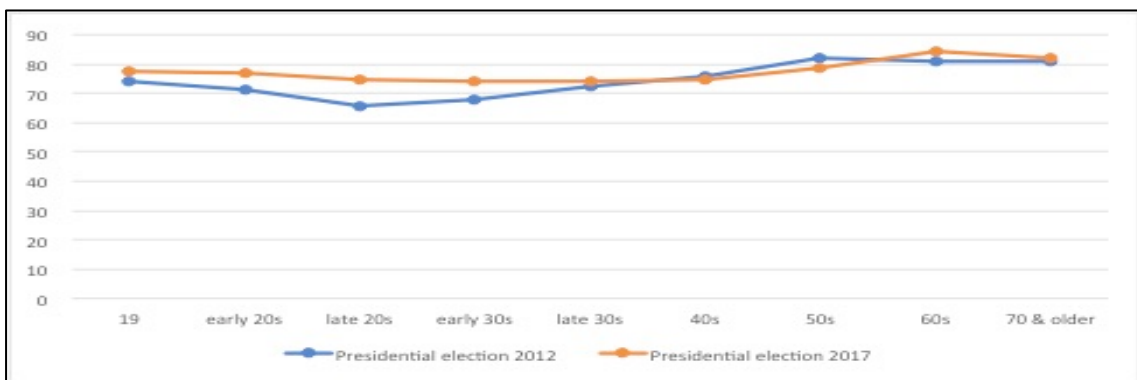*Fake News in the Google Search Trends*

Top dotted line: Google search trends. Solid line: "Taegeukgi rally". Red dotted line: fake news.

Source: Jang (2018)

Figure 4 represents the Korean Taegeukgi rallies, fake news, and the Google search trends from KakaoTalk from November 2016 to April 2017 daily. The top dotted line indicates the Google search trends. The solid line indicates the "Taegeukgi rally" and fake news is on the dotted line. KakaoTalk and fake news on Google search are moving in an interlocking way. The log scale of the Taegeukgi rally, fake news, and KakaoTalk is increasing at the same time. It is possible to infer that participants in the 2017 election process shared fake news using KakaoTalk

Figure 5

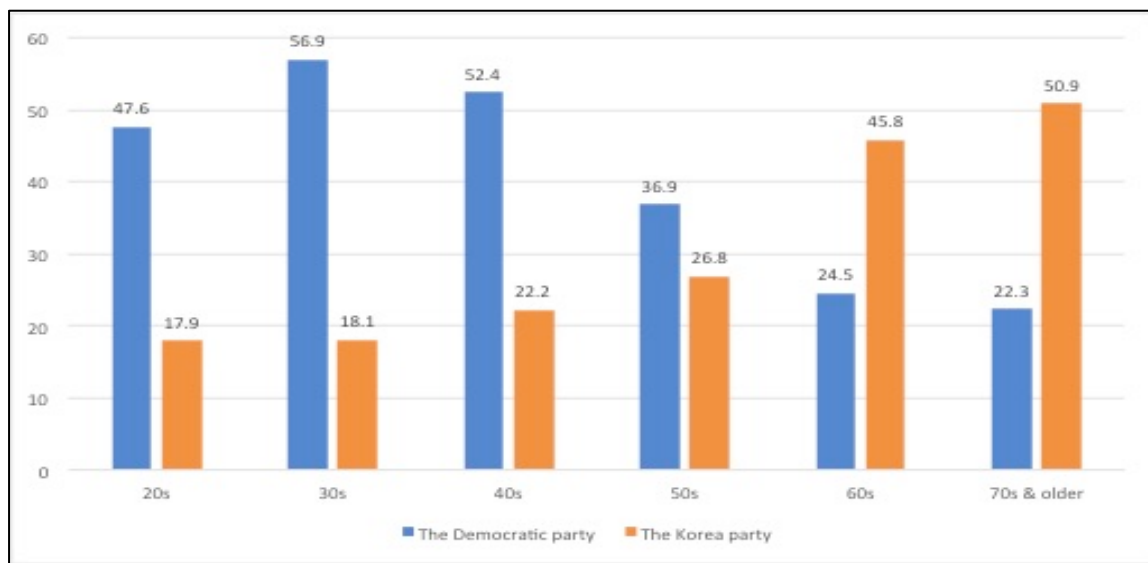*Voter Turnout in the 2012 and 2017 Korea Presidential Elections by Age*

Source: The Korean Political Science Association (2017)

In fact, voter turnout in the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections shows an increase in voter turnout among young people and over 60s. Voting increased by 3.7% points in 19-year-olds, 6.0% points in the early 20s age group, 9.2% point in the late 20s, and 6.6% points in the early 30s. In addition, the turnout increased by 3.2% points for those in their 60s, and 1% point for those over 70.

Figure 6

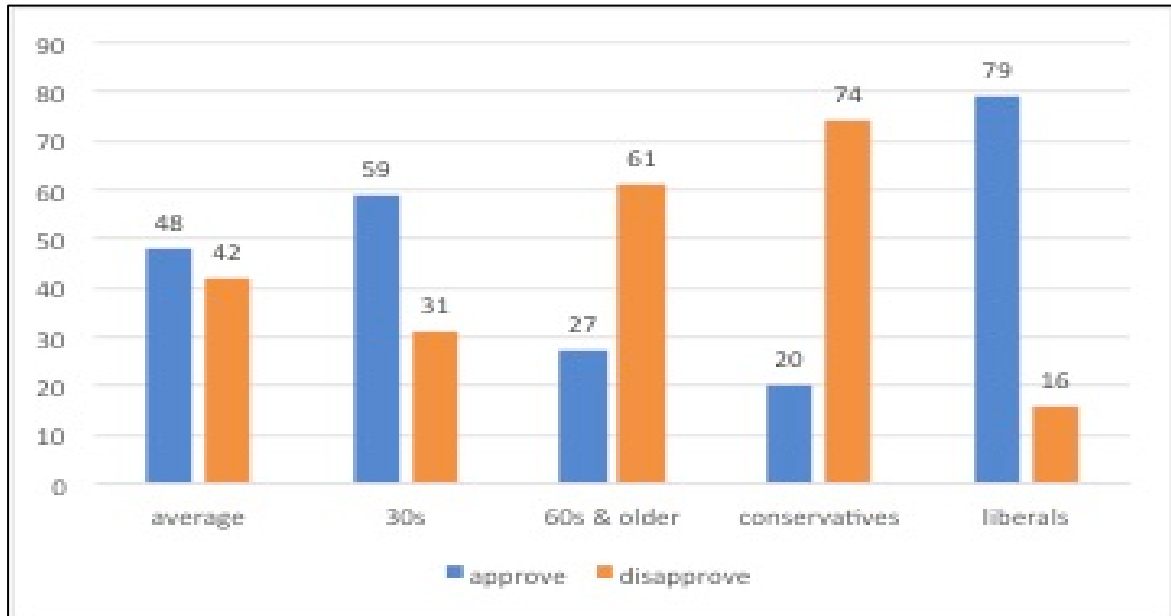*The Results of the 2017 Presidential Election Exit Poll*

Source: Park, 2017

Looking at the results of the 2017 presidential election exit poll (Figure 6), there is a wide gap between the generations of supporters. Those in their 60s and older supported the conservative party, while those in their 20s to 40s supported the relatively progressive party.

These results can be interpreted to suggest that the 2017 presidential election had developed into a political confrontation between pro-impeachment and anti-impeachment, the ruling party and opposition party, progressives and conservatives, young people and older people, and participants in the Taegeukgi rally and participants in the candlelight vigil, which contributed to increasing the turnout of younger people. In particular, Moon Jae-in got more votes from young people, and it contributed significantly to him being elected president. In conclusion, fake news had the effect of mobilizing supporters in the 2017 presidential election.

Figure 7

Survey of the Presidential Approval Rating

Source: Gallop Korea Daily Opinion Presidential Support Survey, July 25, 2019

A survey of the president's approval ratings about two and a half months after the presidential election showed that 31% of those in their 30s did not approve and 59% approved of the job the president was doing while 61% of those age 60 or older did not approve. By political and ideological orientation, 79% of liberals approved, while only 20% of conservatives approved. These results showed that polarization based on political and ideological orientation continues to deepen even after the election.

Conclusion

Fake news was a major issue in the 2017 South Korean presidential election. On top of that, the rapid entry into an information society and the diversification of media channels due to the rapid evolution of information and communication technology appeared to further encourage ideological conflicts. In the new media environment, the likelihood of personal selective exposure has increased. Media users tend to seek information that is consistent with their views rather than taking information that is different from their views. This phenomenon further stimulates collective polarization

in the on- and off-line public forums through fake news, leading to polarization or voter polarization.

Behind the emergence of fake news as a major issue in South Korea's presidential election in 2017 are the changes in the media environment, media polarization, and political polarization. The polarization of media results in political polarization. The pattern of polarization of party support varies depending on voters' socio-economic attributes and media usage patterns. The deepening of media polarization and political polarization provided a selective contact environment for voters during the presidential election, which in turn deepened the fake news phenomenon (Jang, 2018; NHK, 2020).

In Korea, fake news was sent by either the candidates themselves or their election campaigns. The production of fake news was highlighted by those who made their own remarks during television debates and while stumping or aimed to discredit their opponents. In South Korean politics, fake news was created for political motives rather than economic factors.

Looking at the structure that spread fake news, it was often written and distributed by acquaintances as the means to strengthen solidarity among those who share their opinions. The distribution of fake news in the form of rumors through smart phone messages and closed social media spaces was active. Through analysis of survey results, it was confirmed that many voters received fake news in the 2017 presidential election, discussed fake news with people around them, and shared it through SNS media. Also, survey results confirm that emotional mobilization, such as hatred and disgust, is negatively affecting election results. In the end, fake news leads to media polarization, and in this environment, voters are dramatizing their own political orientation.

In Korea, the influence of fake news is intensifying the political polarization after the presidential election; therefore, it can be expected to expand its influence. The significant difference in voting behavior by generation and the fact that the two party's internal bonding became more united as a result of the president's operational satisfaction after the presidential election support the conclusion that fake news intensified political polarization after the presidential election.

Through this study, we were able to identify the existence of social individuals who created patterns of polarization in communication by obtaining information consistent with their existing opinions and views through selective exposure. They move in an extreme direction after setting their ideological positions, and the resulting polarization could seriously undermine the potential to draw consensus not only in elections but also in society as a whole, posing a threat to public opinion and social stability.

In this context, it is more important to understand the political polarization structure resulting from user's behavior regarding the media and the selective selection of information based on ideological orientation and to find patterns to find a solution to the polarization that each society has.

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