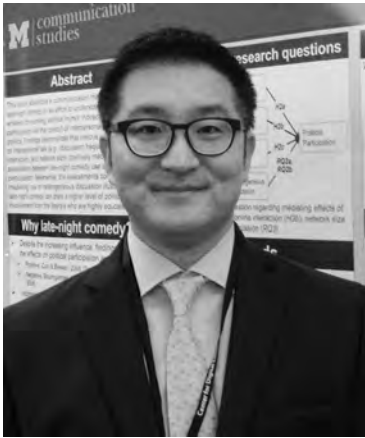


Social Media in the South Korean 2012 Presidential Election

An Interview with Hoon Lee



Hoon Lee (PhD, Communication, University of Michigan) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Nam Center for Korean Studies and a Visiting Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan. Prior to the doctoral program at Michigan, he studied the political economy of East Asia at Stanford University. Lee's current research agenda centers on emerging social media and how they intersect with interpersonal communication to shape the attitudes and behaviors of citizen. Hoon's publications have appeared in such journals as Mass Communications and Society and Communication Research. In the interview that follows, Hoon Lee analyzes the influence of social media in the 2012 ROK presidential campaigns.

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Lucien: *Thanks so much for agreeing to inform EAA readers about the influence of social media in the ROK presidential elections of last December. Among Koreans who use social media for various purposes, what specific kinds of social media are popular with various age groups, particularly those people who are interested in public affairs, and why?*

Hoon Lee: The 2012 presidential election in South Korea was accompanied by an unprecedented influence of social media on citizen engagement in public life. Although social media was unfamiliar to many Korean voters in the previous presidential election in 2008, the rapid penetration of smartphones, which began around 2009, has popularized citizens' use of social media for public affairs. Candidates from major parties were quick to adapt to the changing digital landscape. Prior to Election Day, the Democratic United Party candidate, Moon Jae-in, boasted 100,300 Facebook supporters and 330,700 Twitter followers, whereas the corresponding figures for the New Frontier Party candidate, Park Guen-hye, were, respectively, 29,800 and 250,000. It is now hardly conceivable that future political parties and candidates will forgo the manifold benefits of campaigning through social media because of their potential for effective recruitment and fundraising with minimal cost and efforts and the capability to reach out to diverse segments of the population with tailored messages.

Among various outlets of social media, the political significance of Twitter was particularly noteworthy in South Korea's 2012 election. Although Facebook is deemed to be more popular than Twitter in terms of a general purpose of use, the former has some inherent limitations in being utilized as a platform for political campaigning, given that most information is not made public until both senders and recipients agree to become friends. On the other hand, the ease of building relationships on Twitter and its simplicity to post and re-tweet information afford candidates augmented capacity to promptly spread messages to many voters. Indeed, Park and Moon aimed to take advantage of Twitter's greater potential in the public realm. From March 1 to April 8, 2012, according to one reputable study conducted jointly by *Shin Dong A*, a widely read magazine that covers politics, and *Treum*, a social network consulting firm, there were 93,589 direct tweets between either of the two leading candidates and the electorate, causing 1,684,100 re-tweets. Strikingly, the number of tweets or re-tweets citing either candidate reached

over 3.4 million between the official beginning of campaigning on November 27 and the night before Election Day on December 20.

It is worth noting that the diffusion of smartphones in South Korea served as a primary catalyst for social media-based campaigning. The simpler interface of Twitter appealed to a number of smartphone users. However, the majority of Korean voters in their fifties and sixties, many of who now own smartphones, still hesitate to use Twitter or Facebook due to their difficulties in making sense of various features on those sites. To target those older voters, leading candidates turned their eyes to KakaoTalk, the most popular mobile messenger service in Korea, specifically designed for smartphones, since its convenience and popularity cut across age groups. On this note, Park Guen-hye fared better, with 689,000 KakaoTalk Plus friends, compared to Moon Jae-in's 538,000. It is now believed that Park's campaign through KakaoTalk was successful in drawing a higher turnout within conservative and older voting blocs.

Lucien: *What are some specific examples of how the Park Guen-hye and Moon Jae-in campaigns used social media to woo individual voters and voting blocs?*

Hoon Lee: Both campaigns relied heavily on social media to foster intimacy between candidates and voters. As a candidate from the major conservative party and a daughter of a former dictator, Park strove hard to change rigid and authoritative impressions about her by disclosing details of her everyday life through various social media channels. For example, she sent voters via KakaoTalk numerous pictures in which she was dancing to Psy's "Gangnam Style" and playing a popular mobile game. In addition, the English translation for the title of Park's Facebook page is "Playground with a Swing." The Korean term for swing, *geun-e*, and the pronunciation are virtually indistinguishable from Park's first name. The page features her caricature and a picture puzzle that both were used to accentuate her free and easygoing images. While Park efficiently utilized wit and humor to evade the notion that she was dull and old-fashioned, Moon emphasized his honesty and sincerity to augment affinity with the electorate. In particular, his campaign aimed to advertise that he is kind and devoted to his family. For example, Moon posted a picture on his Facebook page holding a puppy, and his wife tweeted an old photo showing him playing with his son. Despite differing campaign foci, both candidates sought to close the perceived gap from citizens by taking advantage of diverse communication channels via social media. As such, their political parties also passionately utilized location-based services to announce where exactly they were campaigning, which enabled more lively broadcasts of campaigning on-site and more direct communication between candidates and voters.

Lucien: *Could you discern a clear overall strategy in either or both campaigns in terms of social media utilization? If so, please elaborate.*

Hoon Lee: First, Park Guen-hye and Moon Jae-in showed distinct strategies in terms of the timing and the scope of social media campaigns. Recent research by political communication experts Christine Williams and Girish Gulati indicates that challengers tend to adopt campaigning via social media earlier than incumbents, whereas the scope of such campaign activities is more extensive for incumbents.

Examples from the 2012 Korean presidential election align well with these research findings. As a challenger, Moon took an aggressive approach from the very start of the election campaign, attempting to draw as many friends and followers as possible on social network sites (SNS). Meanwhile, Park made less use of SNS early in her campaign, perhaps because of her status as a candidate running for the ruling party, but steadily built momentum through a considerable range of social media outlets as Election Day neared.

Second, the incumbent-challenger difference stands out in terms of the tone of their campaigns. In general, the conventional wisdom is that negative campaigning is more advantageous to challengers, and positive campaigning works better for incumbents. One analysis of Twitter contents revealed that Moon Jae-in's influential tweets revolved mostly around criticizing the ruling party, the former president, Lee Myung-bak, and Park Guen-hye, while Park's messages on Twitter tended to be more positive and future-oriented. Furthermore, perhaps due to the lack of clearly defined issue frames, Moon's camp focused more on hearing peoples' voices through social media rather than proclaiming his key issues and policies.

Lucien: *Regardless of one's opinion about Barack Obama as a candidate or as president, the evidence is convincing in the 2012 US presidential election that the Obama campaign made much more effective use of social media than Mitt Romney's campaign. In your opinion, was either the Park Guen-hye or Moon Jae-in campaign demonstrably more effective with social media than the opposition candidate's organization?*

Hoon Lee: It is paradoxical that Park Guen-hye, the more conservative of the two candidates, is now called the very first SNS president of South Korea, given that social media has frequently been shown to tip the balance in favor of liberals in numerous election campaigns. In fact, Park's campaign was not hesitant to use social media as a way to communicate with voters, thereby challenging expectations that liberals would exhibit greater enthusiasm for emerging information technologies. Since 2004, far before the introduction of well-known SNS, Park has made steady efforts in maintaining her mini-homepage on Cyworld, which has attracted more than ten million visitors thus far. Moreover, when the SNS battle was in full swing, Park's campaign effectively utilized social media to counter the opposition candidate's negative campaigning.

In addition, Park's organization made remarkable progress in diversifying communication channels on social media. As mentioned above, Park's campaigning through KakaoTalk was highly successful in securing votes from the conservative party's natural constituency. However, her campaign was further geared toward broadening the range of communication channels to incorporate social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Cyworld, YouTube, and Flickr, which helped them garner significant support from various voting blocs. Statistics also indicate that such open attitudes and efforts were highly successful in appealing to nontraditional supporters. An analysis of Twitter messages associated with the two leading candidates illustrates that although Moon exceeded Park in terms of the amount of tweets or re-tweets, primarily existing supporters were responsible for Moon's Twitter exchanges. In contrast, Park's tweeted information reached more people who were not her initial supporters. These factors seem to have boosted attention paid to Park's campaign on social media, as suggested by the greater number of Twitter references for her than Moon in the last week before the election.

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Traditional news channels continued to point out the striking similarity between poll results and buzz amount (ie, the number of references) on SNS, accordingly arguing that candidates' performance on social media can be an accurate predictor of election results.

Lucien: How, if at all, did conventional media (TV, radio, newspapers) depict the use of social media by either or both candidates' organizations?

Hoon Lee: Conventional media's depiction of election campaigns on social media normally conforms to their usual coverage patterns, and there were at least two identifiable trends in the 2012 presidential election in South Korea: horse race coverage and strategy frame. First, conventional media tended to present social media campaigns as a horse race by focusing on who was winning or losing. TV networks and newspapers unceasingly assessed candidates' performance in light of numerous figures and statistics associated with SNS campaign activities, including the amounts of exposure, the rate of Twitter messages being re-tweeted, and favorability rankings. Furthermore, traditional news channels continued to point out the striking similarity between poll results and buzz amount (ie, the number of references) on SNS, accordingly arguing that candidates' performance on social media can be an accurate predictor of election results. Indeed, the buzz amounts for the two leading candidates in the last week before the election (51 percent for Park versus 49 percent for Moon) coincided dramatically with the election results (52 percent for Park versus 48 percent for Moon). The second noticeable trend involved strategy framing, where political coverage is devoted to analyzing campaign strategies rather than policy platforms. In this vein, traditional media frequently invited PR specialists from both campaigns for interviews about the underlying motives of their SNS strategies. In sum, mass media's coverage of SNS campaigns during Korea's 2012 election remained largely consistent with

their regular journalistic patterns. Unfortunately, scholars have consistently voiced concerns that these conventional reporting styles may exert some harmful influence on people's attitudes, such as increased cynicism and lowered efficacy for the democratic process.

Lucien: Speaking of interpersonal communication, you've apparently done some interesting work on discussion among people with different opinions on issues of political engagement. Can you share any insights from that work that might be applicable to the ROK's December 2012 presidential election?

Hoon: In an article I coauthored with two other Michigan colleagues, we showed that exposure to disagreement can facilitate citizens' engagement in public life, as long as they are plugged into a congenial strong tie network. I believe that KakaoTalk played a crucial role in consolidating views and attitudes people share within their immediate circle of contact, and this tendency was especially noteworthy among older and conservative voters. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that diverse social media channels afforded unprecedented opportunities for users to encounter a wide range of perspectives and opinions, many of which are likely to contradict one's own norms and values. In a nutshell, the emerging digital landscape has enabled an interesting coupling of greater internal homogeneity and more frequent exposure to non-likeminded viewpoints. This notion suggests that for those conservative voters whose views were confirmed by their repeated KakaoTalk communications, any information that constituted an opposing point of view was likely to facilitate their political action. Although I do not have the substantive data at hand to definitively support this proposition, there is at least one illustrative example. In 2012 televised presidential debates, many citizens were aghast observing left-wing United Progressive Party candidate Lee Jung-hee lambasting Park Guen-hye without any sign of mercy. A series of Lee's attacks garnered a great deal of public attention, and stories got rapidly propagated via a multitude of social media outlets. Some now contend that Lee's severe criticisms eventually backfired, prompting a higher level of political activities among Park's strong supporters. As such, this example illustrates that diverse SNS can result in increased political mobilization, with some serving to boost attitude similarity among users while others increase the likelihood of users encountering heterogeneous viewpoints.

Lucien: Thanks for the interview!

Hoon Lee: My pleasure. ■

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