Leveling the Playing Field: Social Media and Politics in South Korea

By Dukjin Chang

Just four years ago, South Korean domestic politics experienced a remarkable jolt. An electoral playing field that had seemingly been tilted permanently toward conservative parties for more than two decades, suddenly rebalanced, leveling itself for progressive parties in a way never seen since the reemergence of democracy.

The catalyst for that change was Twitter. As Dukjin Chang explains, it remains to be seen whether Twitter can maintain its influence over South Korean politics, but one thing is sure: the age of social media and its place in politics here has arrived.

During the 2010 local elections, South Koreans first realized the decisive influence of social media on politics. Contrary to the predictions of many experts, opposition candidates did much better than expected.

In the election for mayor of Seoul, for example, experts thought that Oh Se-hoon, the ruling party candidate running for a second term, would easily win over Han Myong-sook, the opposition party candidate. Oh did, in fact, win, but by a razor-thin margin of only 0.6 percent.

Another example were the elections for superintendent of education (SOE) in provinces throughout the country. Because the election law does not allow SOE candidates to receive party nominations, they are usually categorized as either “conservative” — meaning supporters of the ruling party — or “progressive” — meaning supporters of the opposition. Before the 2010 elections, there had been only one progressive SOE, Kim Sang-gon of Kyonggi Province. There was widespread media speculation over whether Kim would be re-elected. In the end, a remarkable six progressive candidates were elected as SOEs, including Kim. People wondered what happened. Suspicion quickly turned to Twitter. With slightly over one million South Korean users at that time, Twitter seemed to have worked as a social media platform for potential opposition party supporters to exchange ideas, form consensus opinions and encourage voting.

The same phenomenon was observed even more forcefully in the by-elections of April 2011. Two electoral districts drew the most attention: Bundang and Kangwon provinces. Bundang is an upper-middle class bedroom community located just south of Seoul. Ever since Bundang became a separate electoral district, not a single conservative party candidate had ever lost an election, a reflection of the class interests of the residents. Thus, the town was often called “almost heaven” for conservatives. In the 2011 by-election, two prominent candidates were on the ballot in Bundang — Kang Jae-sup, a former leader of the Hannara Party (which is now the ruling Saenuri Party), and Sohn Hak-kyu, the leader of the opposition Democratic Party. To the surprise of many observers, Sohn won the election, marking the first such triumph of an opposition candidate in Bundang. When the election results were announced, the defeated Kang telling remarked that, “in the future, Hannara candidates should beware of [social networking services].”

Kangwon province, meanwhile, was also a traditional conservative stronghold because it borders North Korea, and has a high concentration of military bases. Moreover, the ruling party candidate for governor of Kangwon, Ohm Ki-young, was a well-known celebrity who had been a famous news anchor for over a decade. Once again, the election outcome defied expectations. Ohm lost to Democratic Party candidate Choi Moon-soon. Now almost everyone had to acknowledge that social media was a big factor in South Korean elections.

The influence of Twitter reached its peak in the by-election for mayor of Seoul in October 2011. Mayor Oh, who had won the election in June 2010, resigned 14 months later after a referendum that he had called over the provision of free lunches for school children failed (he had opposed the measure, but voters approved). Park Won-soon, the opposition party candidate, had a reputation for being adept at using social media. He had spent his career as a human rights lawyer and founder of leading civil society organizations and philanthropic foundations. He was widely followed on Twitter. Post-election analysis shows that tweets encouraging people to vote skyrocketed during the last two hours of polling time. More importantly, the turnout of voters in their 20s and 30s surged during these two hours, as did the number of votes cast for Park. Votes for Na Kyong-won, the ruling party candidate, did not budge during this time. In the end, Park scored an upset victory.

Is Twitter political and progressive? As it became obvious that social media in South Korea were at least sometimes changing the outcome of elections, people began to ask questions like, “What’s wrong with social media?” Twitter appeared to be the most influential social media platform, and that spurred two common questions: “Why is Twitter so political?” and “Why is Twitter so progressive?”

However, these questions are inappropriate; they assume that “political” and “progressive” are characteristics of a specific service, which is simply wrong. Technology including social media interacts with offline society. It is only when we look at the integrated reality of online and offline societies that we can possibly grasp the full picture. Twitter became political and progressive when it was combined with the offline realities of South Korean society. In other countries Twitter may not be political at all. In fact, it could become a vehicle for ultra-right-wing politics. In other countries, services such as Facebook rather than Twitter may be more political. As a result, we need to rephrase the questions in this way: “Why is Twitter in South Korea so political?” and “Why is Twitter in South Korea so progressive?”

The answer lies partly in the traits of the so-called 1987 regime in South Korean politics and partly in the openness of Twitter as a social net-
work. The year 1987 is usually remembered as the beginning of procedural democracy in South Korea, because direct election of the president was reintroduced that year after a long period of military rule. However, even after 1987, there has been a broad consensus that South Korean politics is like a “tilted playing field.”

With the strong collective memory of the Korean War and rapid economic growth during the authoritarian rule of the 1970s and 1980s the political playing field has always leaned conservative. Materialistic values, support for a strong national defense and growth-first policies were election-winning slogans. Many political scientists such as Choi Jang-jip use the term “conservative monopoly” to describe this situation. In this political atmosphere, voters who feel that they are not properly represented have little incentive to vote. As a result, there has historically been a big gap in terms of voter turnout between different social groups. Conservative voters vote more often than progressive ones. Older voters vote more than younger ones. For example, the general election in 2008 saw a record-low overall voter turnout of 46.1 percent, but turnout differed significantly by age group. The turnout of people 60 years old or more was 65.5 percent, while turnout for voters in their late 20s was only 24.2 percent.

COLLECTIVE ACTION
Now let us turn to the openness of Twitter as a social network. Unlike other popular social media such as Facebook and Kakao Talk, the Korea-based instant messaging service, Twitter offers the most openness. Users can make social ties simply by following someone. Compared to closed social networks, open networks offer a diversity of social relationships. In closed social networks, people largely maintain their social ties with people they already know and who often hold similar opinions, an example of what is called homophily. In open networks like Twitter, they come across people from all walks of life, which guarantees being exposed to wider range of opinions. In closed social networks people who already know each other are likely to talk about personal matters. In open social networks with little, if any, previous encounters, people often end up talking about issues they all know — in other words, they talk about public agendas.

When elections are viewed as a matter of collective action, two conditions have to be met to reach a desired outcome. One is that there has to be a large enough number of voters who want the same outcome. When the tilted playing field of South Korean politics and the openness of a social network like Twitter are combined, voters who feel that they are not properly represented come across people of like mind. In discussing public agendas of common interest, people realize that they are not alone. They find out that there are enough people who, if they act together, can change the world.

The collective action problem also involves the fact that when individual rational voters believe the political system is dominated by a large enough number of voters with preferences that are different from theirs, they have little incentive to vote. It is almost always true that rational voters find the costs associated with voting greater than the benefits their vote may create, which usually converges to zero. However, it is often overlooked that this view is based on an underlying assumption that voters make their decisions as isolated individuals. This is no longer true with social networking services such as Twitter. People discuss public agendas within a more or less stable social environment. They know who supports which candidate and encourage each other to vote. A good example is what in South Korean is known as “photo evidence,” or injungshat nori. People take a photo at the polling place and post it on Twitter as evidence that they voted, which then gets retweeted by other people with accompanying words of praise. This changes the rational calculation, because it adds a new term to the equation — social approval. Under these circumstances, the rational voter’s comparison becomes one between costs associated with voting versus the sum of benefits his or her vote may create and the benefits coming from the approval of other people. In this new situation, benefits are usually perceived as greater than the costs, which leads rational voters to vote.

This means that voter turnout is bound to go up. How much may depend on how many people use Twitter. Around the time of the 2010 local election, there were 1.13 million South Korean Twitter users. The number rose to 2.8 million in the April by-election of 2011, to 5 million in the general election of 2012 and over 6 million in the presidential election of 2012. The total number of voters as of 2012 was 40 million. It is quite likely that the number of voters on Twitter is significant enough to influence, if not change, election outcomes. However, it is not just the number of people on Twitter who did not vote in the past but who now vote. The composition of these returning voters is even more important.
NETWORKS VERSUS ORGANIZATIONS: THE ELECTIONS OF 2012

Having said this, it seems that the influence of Twitter diminished in the two most important elections in 2012: the April general election and the December presidential election. The conservative ruling party won both, although by a slim margin. Analysis shows that the Twitter effect in terms of opposition party votes in the general election was about half what it was in the 2011 Seoul mayoral election. In the presidential election, the Twitter effect almost disappeared.

This can be understood if we view it as a battle between networks and organizations. The way networks operate is often quite different from how organizations work. Horizontal networks like Twitter are usually good at spreading information and mobilizing participation. Organizations, with their explicit goals and hierarchy, often find that networks can be detrimental to their interests. In explaining why the influence of Twitter seems to have diminished in the 2012 elections, we can point to two different sources of organizational interest. The online meddling in election campaigns by some government agencies and ruling party supporters is one such example. The other comes from within the opposition party itself.

As Twitter became significant in determining election outcomes, there seems to have been a panic within the ruling party and the conservative administration of President Lee Myung-bak. Several ruling party politicians openly suggested that they would launch “online warriors” to fight against the “leftists” on Twitter. Analysts of Twitter data found that attempts to manipulate public opinion through link-farming and creating pseudo-accounts increased greatly.

Many experts began to suspect that there were organizational attempts to hire people to spread political opinions favorable to the ruling party, although they could not identify which organizations these were. After the presidential election was over, it was discovered that some government agencies including the National Intelligence Service (NIS) were meddling by tweeting and retweeting messages that praised Park Geun-hye, the ruling party candidate, and bashed Moon Jae-in, the opposition party candidate.

The ruling Saenuri Party tried to ignore the revelations, arguing that the number of such messages found by the Prosecutor’s Office was too small to influence the whole Twittersphere. However, the real number of messages is likely greater than revealed by the Prosecutor’s Office, because it would naturally have counted the number very conservatively to ensure the data would be effective evidence in court. Moreover, election meddling by government agencies is outright illegal, regardless of the number of political messages posted. Although the case is still pending in court, there seems no denying that government organizations, ruling party organizations, or both, interfered in social media networks to achieve their organizational goals.

The other instance of conflict between networks and organizations came from within the opposition party. Amid the changes in the election dynamics since the rise of Twitter, there was a fundamental misunderstanding within the opposition Democratic Party. It won elections it thought it would lose without understanding why. Surveys of Twitter users demonstrate that their political stance is much more reformist than the center-oriented Democratic Party. In normal times, Twitter users criticize the Democratic Party as much as the conservative Saenuri Party. In elections, many Twitter users seem to reluctantly cast their votes for the Democratic Party, because they know that the probability of more progressive minor parties winning the election is near zero. Without understanding this, the Democratic Party and some of its supporters were confident that Twitter users were on their side. Assured by previous experiences of winning elections, they concentrated on retweeting their messages in the two elections in 2012.

I have been analyzing Twitter since August 2010. Millions of tweets written by South Korean users have been crawled via the Twitter API and analyzed every day. Since Twitter is a fast-growing network, parameters change very quickly. However, there is one surprising consistency. The balance among tweets, replies, and retweets has been almost always close to 25 percent, 65 percent and 10 percent, respectively. Translating these numbers into plain language, this balance is quite understandable. Actively tweeting something means sharing one’s own views with others. Because the rules of social life do not allow people to monopolize conversation, the data suggest that it seems best to talk about oneself in posts only one in four times (25 percent). Rather than monopolizing conversations, it is better to comment on other people’s opinions, answer their questions and exchange ideas. The fine balance seems to be two out of three posts (65 percent). If people sympathize with each other through these mutually respectful conversations, they can reach a consensus perhaps one in ten times (10 percent). This balance was consistently observed until the 2012 elections.

As the 2012 elections approached, these numbers began to change. Conversations through replies decreased and retweets increased significantly. This is because many Twitter users wanted to reach the biggest possible audience by retweeting. Some opposition party supporters even asked others to “Shut up and retweet!” They believed that spreading their arguments to as many people as possible could bring them victory. But this only hampered the way Twitter worked in elections. To the eyes of ordinary Twitter users, this meant redundant messages from people they did not know. As a result, many ordinary Twitter users began to lose interest or became immune to such messages. If one part of meddling with social media networks came from organizations that thought Twitter was unfavorable to them, this ruining of the Twittersphere by the Democratic Party and its supporters came from organizations that thought it was favorable to them.

As the political influence of Twitter seems to have waned in the 2012 elections, people have started to ask whether it was a temporary fad and if there is a future for social media in politics. I have no way to predict the future of a particular service, but one thing that seems certain is that there is no going back to the disconnected world. In the future, the source of influence may be some other service than Twitter, but people have now learned that they are stronger when they are better connected. As a result, social media will remain an indispensable factor in the political equation of the future.

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