

Through the Looking Glass: The Role of Portals in South Korea's Online News Media Ecology

Tim Dwyer¹, Jonathon Hutchinson²³

Media manipulation of breaking news through article selection, ranking and tweaking of social media data and comment streams is a growing concern for society. We argue that the combination of human and machine curation on media portals marks a new period for news media and journalism. Although intermediary platforms routinely claim that they are merely the neutral technological platform which facilitates news and information flows, rejecting any criticisms that they are operating as de facto media organisations; instead, we argue for an alternative, more active interpretation of their roles. In this article we provide a contemporary account of the South Korean ('Korean') online news media ecology as an exemplar of how contemporary media technologies, and in particular portals and algorithmic recommender systems, perform a powerful role in shaping the kind of news and information that citizens access. By highlighting the key stakeholders and their positions within the production, publication and distribution of news media, we argue that the overall impact of the major portal platforms of Naver and Kakao is far more consequential than simply providing an entertaining media diet for consumers. These portals are central in designing how and which news is sourced, produced and then accessed by Korean citizens. From a regulatory perspective the provision of news on the portals can be a somewhat ambiguous and moving target, subject to soft and harder regulatory measures. While we investigate a specific case study of the South Korean experience, we also trace out connections with the larger global media ecology. We have relied on policy documents, stakeholder interviews

1 Department of Media and Communication, University of Sydney. Email: timothy.dwyer@sydney.edu.au

2 University of Sydney, Australia

3 **Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank the following people who provided us with insights into the South Korean news ecology: Yongwoon Shim, Senior Research Fellow, SK Telecom; Daewon Kim, Director Government Relations & Policy Affairs, Kakao; Sung Jin Yang, Editor of Digital Content, The Korea Herald; Jin-Hyung Kim, Managing Director International Affairs and Business, Yonhap News Agency; and Se Uk Oh, News Trust Project, Korean Press Foundation. We would also like to thank Kungmi Choi at TBS-FM in Seoul.

Funding Statement: This research is funded by and is an output of the Australian Research Council Discovery Project scheme, project number DP180100034.

and portal user 'walk throughs' to understand the changing role of news and its surfacing on a distinctive breed of media platforms.

Keywords: South Korea, portals, social media platforms, news pluralism, algorithms, public affairs journalism, media pluralism

Introduction

In this article we highlight the role of portals in the context of the Korean media ecology. Through policy synthesis and interviews with key Korean news media stakeholders, we sketch an outline for the shaping dynamics of the local news media industry. By exploring the interactions between journalists, news production houses, the state, portals and users, we underscore the relations of news production and consumption with the portals at the centre of the Korean media ecology. Our broader intention in this article is to connect the Korean news media context to larger global news production and consumption scenarios across digital platforms.

In Korea, the Reuters 2019 News Report notes that 'home-grown portals have become the leading destination for news consumers...and now online video and podcasts are beginning to disrupt the broadcast sector' (p.142). It notes, conservatively in our view, that Naver dominates online news consumption with 66% and Kakao with 34% with an attractive mix of news, blogs, chat, shopping, games and email. Another noteworthy trend is that 38% of Korean audiences are using YouTube for news, well ahead of most other surveyed countries, and this resonates with comments provided to us by our in-country stakeholder interviewees. The webmetrics company, Koreanclick.com recorded YouTube mobile app users spending on average 1094 minutes on the app in July 2018, while Naver App users spent about 700 minutes. It is interesting to note that the 2019 Reuters Korean country report found that 'concerns about fake news and misinformation (59%) are rising with concern focused on the distribution of politically extreme views on YouTube. Last year, the government examined ways to effectively regulate fake news online, but concluded that any governmental intervention might curtail freedom of expression' (Reuters, 2019, p. 142). Podcasts are increasingly popular as a source of information and, in addition, 9% of those surveyed saying that they were using voice activated speakers for news.

In conducting our research of the Korean portals, we formed the view that their news media ecology offers an important and perhaps cautionary paradigm for platform studies, in terms of assessing the dynamic relations between algorithmic curation of news and conceptualisation of media pluralism.

Global Platforms, News Algorithms and Media Pluralism

Globally, our contemporary news diet is increasingly reliant on content that is sourced from social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, WeChat, TikTok (Douyin), YouTube and Instagram.

Access to news on smartphones has doubled in the past six years within countries such as Spain, the USA and the UK, while accessing news via Facebook has maintained at around 65% of all users (Reuters, 2018). However, according to Reuters, who surveyed more than 75,000 global users, we have witnessed the first recorded period where social media use for news has declined, largely it seems because of the rise of those same platforms championing their private messaging services (Reuters, 2018). Users are moving towards private messaging services (the ‘pivot to private’) on platforms including on WhatsApp (54%), Instagram (16%) and less obvious platforms such as Snapchat (9%). Reuters report that ‘WhatsApp has become a primary network for discussing and sharing news in non-Western countries like Brazil (53%) Malaysia (50%), and South Africa (49%) (Reuters, 2019, p. 9).

These trends suggest social media and messaging platforms remain significant intermediaries between publics and news journalism at the centre of the debates surrounding media pluralism. In their recent review of pluralism within the UK’s news media ecosystem, the Media Reform Coalition (MRC) noted, “The UK’s media markets cannot be considered in isolation from the digital platforms and intermediaries that increasingly determine how audiences access and consume media content...these entities act as the gatekeepers determining how the public obtains information (through search); how people communicate (through social media) and how citizens access news and journalism” (MRC, 2019, p. 14). It seems to us that this kind of systemic overview, one that takes into account a range of interacting components and stakeholders that impact on the circulation and surfacing of news, is key to contemporary news ecology analysis.

However, as powerful as they are, the US-centric social media platforms are one source of contemporary news and journalism, where Möller et al. (2019) note there are usually three key pathways for accessing online news: visiting the news outlet homepage directly, through search engines, and the third is via social media. In their study they found access through the news homepage directly equates to 33% of users, encountering news through search is 32%, 25% of users access news through a combination of news websites and search, and 11% access their news through social media. They also found that those users who are politically interested consume more content through social media, sending a signal to the platform algorithms that they like the content, resulting in a tailored feed which then contains more of their sort of material. Their findings underpin three important areas for our research: first, the prevalence of accessing news online and questions of pluralism; second, the significance of platforms in accessing news; and third, the role of algorithms in news curation. The combination of these three significant changes in recent news consumption shifts the focus of journalism research towards the agency of platforms and portals, the relationship between humans and machines for accessing information, and the regulation that surround news availability and visibility.

Understanding the role of platforms relates to our broader project focus on news portals in general, and especially those in Korea. Platform studies have enabled researchers to identify a number of key aspects surrounding how news and information is produced, published and accessed on these platforms. Beyond being an economic and strategic regulatory response for online content providers to refer to themselves as ‘platforms’, Gillespie (2010) argues that platforms play a far more important role as the curators of public discourse. Helmond (2015, p. 1) suggests platforms

are a prominent infrastructure, noting platformization ‘entails the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data “platform ready”’. Bruns notes the shift away from news websites towards considering social media platforms as a prime space for accessing journalism, framing this shift as a problem for news organisations and the news process (2018, p. 6). He further observes that the news process flows from, ‘publication through dissemination to engagement—and (now) takes place immediately within the third-party spaces provided by the social media platforms themselves: the outlet’s own Website now merely serves as the place where a story is published’. Another important aspect of platform studies includes tracking influential online content producers who continue to dominate as their content is exposed to large audiences through strategic production processes. During a ten-year longitudinal research project on YouTube, Bärthel (2018) notes the top 85% of all content consumed being created by a mere 3% of YouTube content producers. With this production power rule as a backdrop, platforms and their operation are central to any contemporary analysis of the news and journalism process, especially in terms of news media pluralism.

In the Australian context, this situation of the market domination by platforms prompted the then Treasurer, Scott Morrison, to direct the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to undertake a *Digital Platforms Inquiry*. A key probe of this inquiry was to highlight “there are important questions to be asked about the role the global digital platforms play in the supply of news and journalism in Australia, what responsibility they should hold as gateways to information and business, and the extent to which they should be accountable for their influence” (ACCC, 2018, p. 1). The preliminary report from the ACCC noted that although these digital platforms are increasingly performing similar roles as existing media businesses, there is little to no regulation. “The regulation of media sectors supplying news and journalistic content varies by sector and different regulatory models and obligations apply for TV, radio, print and online publishers” (p. 129). The ACCC, then, was very conscious of the pressures for regulation, or at least new forms of regulation. Responding to two of the Commission’s recommendations, and from the specific perspective of online news and journalism, Flew and Dwyer (2019) argued:

we support the recommendation (5) for the establishment of a regulatory authority to “monitor, investigate and report on the ranking of news and journalistic content by digital platforms and the provision of referral services to news media businesses”. In addition, we support recommendation (6) to “conduct a separate, independent review...to ensure...regulations are applied effectively and consistently”, in relation to the production and delivery of news and journalistic content. (p.3)

The push to make platforms more accountable through regulation extends far beyond the Australian inquiry alone. In the UK, The Cairncross (2019) Review is primarily concerned with shoring up ‘high journalism’ within the journalism environment we highlight above to solve the problem of ‘broken journalism’ (Barnett, 2019). Most significantly, the Cairncross Report recommended the establishment of an Institute for Public Interest News to forge publisher/platform partnerships, distribute revenues accordingly and monitor the quality of journalism. This recommendation comes at a time that Facebook itself is establishing the News

Oversight Board to monitor content governance, a suitable response to increasing pressure from publics and Senate enquiries (Zuckerberg, 2018). The vast array of platform attention, then, both externally and internally, and the pressure to more accurately regulate news access points has significantly increased in the last few years. The following Korean case studies demonstrate the role platforms, social media and portals have on the production and distribution of public and non-public affairs journalism.

Naver: A Search Engine Plus

As the dominant source of news in Korea, the Naver portal is generally referred to as a ‘search engine’ in the sense referred to previously by Moller et al. (2019). But to place Naver into this category is only partly accurate. While it is certainly the case that a large search engine box sits across the top of the home page, it is not used in the way that Google or Yahoo search is used; although Google and Naver do share some common features. For example, both brands offer a news aggregation service that is algorithmically personalised, based on past user interactions. But the Naver homepage offers a wider range of functions including news stories, weather, shopping, blogs, cartoons, mail, a dictionary, stock market information, music and books. Therefore, it is easy to see why Naver can be considered as the ‘Korean homepage for the Internet’ (Marsden, 2017). The Naver and Kakao portals actually prefer the ‘Internet Service Provider’ moniker, and shy away from any broadcast-like analogies, with their attendant regulatory assumptions (Kim, 2019).

Yet, algorithmically, Naver and Google operationalize in quite different ways. Koreans use Naver as a destination to help them connect and explore in a more broadly culturally way; it’s not perceived just as a means to Hoover up page-ranked information on a specific topic or event (although it can do that as well). Koreans use the site as a hub where they can see news on a range of their interests and receive suggestions and get ideas for things to search for. It acts as a cultural repository that users can browse, with plenty of rich media content that may then lead users to search for more news on a topic of interest. This multi-dimensional functionality means that although users may go elsewhere for certain things such as e-commerce and travel sites, Naver operates the first stop for most Koreans when they interface with the Internet, both on mobile and desktop and according to some, the portal has ‘outsized control over what Koreans read and see’ (Bogle, 2017).

Naver provides search services in ‘various collections such as a Web collection, a directory collection, an image collection, a news collection, an encyclopedia collection, a thesis and article collection, a knowledge collection, and so on’ (Park et al., 2005, p. 206). Naver is the core source of information for many Koreans having a very strong relationship with the Korean publishers and news agencies. In 2017 Naver was reported to be negotiating fees for content agreements with 124 news outlets each year as Naver News In-Link partners (Bogle, 2017). The In-Link system means that the partners’ articles are published on the portal; and it’s an effective way of keeping users bouncing around inside Naver’s advertising world. Digital advertising revenue was reported as 2.97 trillion won (\$US 2.7 billion) in 2017 making the In-Link partners total fees of \$US40 million

look tiny in comparison (Bogle, 2017). At the time of that assessment another 500 or so news outlets were unpaid “search partners” and users would be sent to the originator’s site, in a manner similar to *Google News* or Facebook’s *Instant Articles*. These In-Link partners have entered into supply agreements with the portal, and these have become critical to the economics of the news industry in Korea. The main state-controlled news agency, Yonhap, has such a relationship and supplies around a quarter of all the news articles appearing on the Naver and Kakao portals.

The news experience for a Naver user, like all news experiences, is ultimately a branded cultural experience that becomes a very familiar and accepted process of access and discovery. When Gillespie argues in *Custodians of the Internet*, “Platforms are sociotechnical assemblages and complex institutions” he is therefore underscoring these cultural dimensions (2018, p. 18).

A common approach towards researching platforms and applications (apps) is to undertake a ‘walk-through’ method (Giddings, 2006; Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2018). On performing a walkthrough on Naver, it became clear that the platform is designed to be a kind of ‘one-stop-shop’ for Koreans, as it provides a number of services beyond news articles. It also has a search function, an entertainment section, an email client, a space for keeping notes organised, Web Toon, and a number of other functions. We therefore engaged the efforts of a native speaking Korean to translate the app and explain how it is used. Choi (2019) made these interesting observations:

...Korean people just wouldn’t open up their phone and use Google to search the web. It’s kind of our go to app for almost everything in that, say, I want to check the weather in Seoul, I will open up Naver to do this. I will probably then see what is happening in the K Pop world, and because I work in radio, I then start to check what news articles appear... Because I use Naver [most of the time], I have subscribed to a number of news topics, so the news that is presented to me is usually what I am interested in. I understand the editorial process here, and am aware of the algorithmic process, but that’s probably because I work in the media. I’m not sure that’s the case for Koreans more broadly.

Choi also highlighted that the majority of news articles she sees comes from Yonhap News, and also notes that she rarely leaves the portal to go back to the native news site (Choi, 2019). Indeed, the assemblage of technology and information that is presented on this app is Naver-branded and caters to a particular user experience. The editorial, both human and non-human, is designed to address a particular user and retain their time within this environment. The longer the user remains on the Naver app, the more ‘normalised’ the branded-experience becomes.

Kakao: A Portal Meets a Killer Messaging App

Kakao is a Korean internet company formed through the merger of Daum and Kakao in 2014 but was rebranded the following year, and is now referred to as *Kakao*. Like Naver, Kakao has many applications associated with the core portal destination, including its super popular service, *KakaoTalk*. ‘Kakaotalk is a Korean mobile application that allows users to set up a profile

containing an avatar and a status message. Users can text each other or participate in a group chat with many friends' (Shim et al., 2012, p. 5).

Kakao has over 220 registered users and 50 million active monthly users worldwide with more than 44 million based in Korea. It is available in 15 languages but used by more by 93% of smartphone owners in Korea (Statistica, 2019). For Korean users then, this represents an unassailable lead on rival messaging services such as Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Line, WeChat and Naver (also used for messaging). The closest messaging app in terms of popularity is the Line app, which may potentially gain some ground in Korea following the recent merger with the Internet portal Yahoo Japan. Under the terms of the merger agreement a Softbank subsidiary and Line's parent company, Naver, will each hold 50% of the joint venture holding company (Mochizuki, 2019). Merging the Japanese Line (the dominant chat app in Japan) and Yahoo databases, combined with the deep pockets of Softbank and Naver, may eventually be able to make some inroads into Kakao's near monopoly domination over chat messaging in Korea. Bearing in mind the global trend to increased usage of messaging for formerly social media network functions, this move may be one to watch. Interestingly, at the time of the merger the new company announced that they would aim to become "one of the world's leading AI tech companies" (Mochizuki, 2019).

One of the most popular aspects of Kakao is its portal (formerly) Daum, which is the second largest portal in the country and has 38% share of the Korean news aggregation services (Newman et al., 2018). Kakao operates in a similar fashion to a social network and chat app, and like Naver pays news organisations for access to their content. Interestingly, Kakao has a storyfunding service 'by which users can donate money to citizen journalists, civic organisations, and investigative reporters' (Newman et al., 2018, p. 136). Our research interviewees agreed that with Naver's lead in market share, the Kakao portal is unlikely to catch up with them anytime soon. However, with a significant share of the market Kakao are in a position to offer differentiated products and services (KakaoTalk and Kakaotaxi are just two of several service apps), and to also make competitive, some suggest more conservative, news curation interventions (both human and algorithmic).

Algorithms and News

A critical area we wish to focus on in this article is problematising the impact that algorithms are having on online news and media content diversity. Algorithms, recommender systems and personalisation all shape exposure to new information in what Pariser (2011) refers to as a filter bubble – or an echo chamber of similar discussions amongst users who are all concerned with similar issues. Algorithms, 'understood as the coded instructions that a computer needs to follow to perform a given task, (they) are deployed to make decisions, to sort and make meaningfully visible the vast amount of data produced and available on the web' (Bucher, 2018, p. 3), and they are key mechanisms on digital platforms that curate online news (Wilding et al., 2018). With news personalisation, Pasquale (2015, p. 78) notes 'Google News might give pride of place to baseball, music, or left-wing politics according to the reputations we establish', suggesting the information

we are exposed to is based on the historical access to news. Therefore, we can say that the combination of algorithms on digital platforms forms the basis for recommender systems which have ‘the goal of enhancing the findability and exposure of their content, and to improve interactive services and personalisation’ (Sørensen & Hutchinson, 2018, p. 94). Online news discoverability through recommender systems is a useful tool for personalising news to the user, but one which also raises various algorithmic concerns, as well as significant data scandals which have been identified by a number of scholars and commentators (Moore, 2018; Wylie, 2019).

Noble (2018), for example, has argued algorithms can be inherently racist and exclusionary, are inherently political (Bucher, 2018; Forlano, 2018), and impinge on civil rights through predictive policing (Civil Rights.org, 2019). These concerns, then, are the basis for a number of inquiries and investigations from several global agencies, including the Data & Society Institute, AI Now Institute and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights for example, to ensure that plurality remains a significant public policy issue within digital intermediation (Moore & Tambini, 2018; Napoli, 2019).

Globally, there are an increasing number of calls for increased transparency, accountability and regulation for these digital platforms. According to the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report, social media users see misinformation, trust and transparency as a significant issue, where 60% of Europeans have called for greater platform and content regulation, compared with 41% in the US. The *AI Now Report* (Whittaker et al., 2018) considered these same issues within the context of automation and artificial intelligence (AI), and constructed a series of key recommendations to address these concerns, along with labour issues, and the need for policy interventions around questions of race, gender and power. In this context the Silicon Valley rhetoric of “move fast and break things” is now no longer an acceptable mantra given the potential harms it may cause to society; with journalism remaining a key vehicle for public issues on behalf of an informed citizenry.

Yet while many public interest groups are calling for greater transparency, this can be empty rhetoric for publics and users needing to interrogate what is, generally, a complex mathematical equation: an algorithm. Instead, the 2019 *Automating Society* report on automated decision making within the European Union region frames these concerns through arguable a more useful lens of ‘understandability’. ‘There are a number of ways we can enhance citizens’ expertise to enable them to better assess the consequences of automated decision-making’ (Algorithmic Watch, p. 14). In Finland for example, there are now free public courses available for citizens, in which 100,000 have enrolled, where ‘some societal implications of AI are introduced, for example, algorithmic bias and de-anonymisation, to underscore the need for policies and regulations that help society to adapt more easily to the use of AI’ (ibid). If users are aware that their online news feed is manipulated by these sorts of mechanisms, they are better equipped to source diverse content in the absence of suitable regulation. Pasquale has recently undertaken a survey on the short history of ‘algorithmic accountability’ and observes that ‘just as the “first wave” of algorithmic accountability research and activism has targeted, existing systems, an emerging “second wave”

has begun to address more structural concerns. Both waves will be essential to ensure that a fairer, more emancipatory political economy of technology' (Pasquale, 2019).

While this environment remains in transition as a regulatory grey area, the online news and journalism market in Korea is, we see a significant case study for studying algorithms and news diversity not least for the massive national audiences their portals attract. In our view the Korean news media ecology contains some important signposts in the debate for news media pluralism and its relation to questions of automation of editorial decision-making.

Key Industry Stakeholders in Korea's News Market

The traditional Korean news industry is built on the recognisable foundations of most global media industries through its print, radio and television networks which have paved the way for the current networked media organisations, including the news portals. Many of these organisations are still in operation today, where many of them made significant landgrabs for telecom and internet service providers (ISPs) facilitated by key stakeholders including Korea Telecom (KT), SK Telecom (SK) and LG during the 90s. Currently, KT, SK and LG are the largest providers of mobile and desktop internet access. In terms of broadcast news media, the main market players are KBS, MBS, JTBC, Yonhap TV, YTN, MBN and SBS. The main newspaper publishers are Chosunilbo, Joongangilbo, Dongailbo, Maeil Business, Kyunhyang and Hankyoreh.

In relation more specifically to the online news environment, there are a number of key players within the content publication and distribution landscape for the Korean market. A powerful player in the regulatory space is the Media Partnerships Evaluation Committee (MPEC) - a joint initiative by Naver and Kakao (then Daum) to establish a self-regulatory body to oversee the online news environment, and specifically the portals in 2015. Certainly, it appears to be partly a strategic response, often seen in the media sector, to ward off tougher black letter responses by government and regulatory authorities. Given their dominance in Korea it is not surprising that the portals have moved to a predominantly self-regulatory model in the 'Media Partnership Evaluation Committee'.

Officially, the MPEC's main purpose is to manage the fairness of news distribution on the portals. The portals had been criticised about their news partnerships and why particular articles surfaced more prominently on the platforms. This was, and continues to be, in a climate of strong criticism of the portals manipulation of news articles, usually in favour of the incumbent political party. This was the case during the Park Geun Hye led government, her subsequent impeachment, and then now during the Moon Jae-In government. It has been reported that the Committee serves two main functions, first, to evaluate which news outlets can supply news to the portals, and second, to penalise news outlets that violate contract conditions, including publishing sponsored, violent content or clickbait articles (Bogle, 2017).

The allegation has been aired that publishers will use trending topics to over produce clickbait articles, and thus there was a need to monitor and penalise, and in a few cases not renew partnership news supply agreements. To stop access to Naver's traffic firehose can potentially sound the death knell for publishers relying on the clicks and therefore advertising dollars. This is a significant

amount of power to be welded by an unelected body whose membership is made up of the portals themselves, and media experts, major press outlets and broadcasters appointed by the portals; they are often criticised for the application of opaque assessment criteria in relation to news ‘quality factors’. In effect these judgement calls are defining the sorts of content that is appropriate for the Korean citizens, as well as which news sources are suitable to provide journalism to the news portals.

Interestingly, both news portals sponsor the Committee to remain in operation. Twice yearly, the Committee accepts applications from all news sources and agencies that would like to be included as providers to the news portals. The non-government affiliation, along with their connection to the news portals, and their ability to enable or prohibit particular news agencies, positions them as significantly powerful players in shaping the news media within Korea. Naver itself also made changes to the portal’s news curation in response to critics; in 2017 it announced that by 2018 it would be moving from a combination of human and machine curation to an entirely automated news selection model. Nonetheless, the company noted that humans would be creating the news selection algorithm and decisions regarding the partnership agreements with news outlets would be made entirely by humans (Bogle, 2017).

The most significant online news outlets are the powerful Yonhap News Agency, News1.kr, Joins.com (JoongAng), Chosun.com, JTBC.Joins.com, Newsis.com, Donga.com, News.SBS.co.kr and Hankooki.com (The Korea Times), who are primarily responsible for Korean news agenda setting (Lim, 2011). Of these major online outlets, one of the key news providers in the Korean context is the Yonhap News Agency. Yonhap News Agency is a wire service that ‘delivers domestic and overseas news in real time’ and covers ‘all news topics from politics, business and social issues to culture and sports. The agency produces more than 3,000 news items daily, including articles, photos, graphics and video’ (Yonhap, 2019). According to Jin-Gyu Kim, an IT Manager at Yonhap, ‘These items are provided to about 180 local news outlets, more than 120 Internet portals and new media platforms, some 210 government ministries and local authorities, and around 250 private businesses’ (Lee & Joshi, 2018, p. 226). Yonhap News Agency is one of the largest suppliers of news to the country, and has approximately 25% of the total amount of news on the two major news portals, Naver and Kakao. The media homogeneity compounds with a smartphone penetration rate of approximately 80% (Statista, 2018).

While the Korean news and journalism market appears to be relatively free and open on the surface, on closer inspection it can be seen to be significantly skewed to a small number of dominant news provider voices. The arrangement between the news organisations, the MPEC and the two dominating news portals significantly limits the diversity of sources for the Korean citizens. In the following section we will explore this relationship using field data and policy documents.

Media Contexts of Disinformation

Park et al. (2010) have researched the broader context of Korean Internet regulation finding that “Korea is a highly networked country, but Internet use has been strongly regulated”. In Korea the majority of online platforms require a valid national ID number (and the real name) for verification when users first register. This system first gained traction in the wake of serious online social problems relating to defamatory language and rumour mongering, including the slander of celebrities, and suicides linked with these communications.

The Korean Communication Commission (KCC) regulates the online industry, including Naver and Kakao. Content is closely monitored by the KCC, and our research confirms that news content on the portals is required under Korean law to be redistributed rather than originally produced (Kim, 2019).

In previous years there has been minimal traditional editorial intervention, amounting mainly to story selection, packaging and layout. In talking with Dae Woon Kim (2019), the Director Government relations & Policy affairs team for Daum Kakao, he noted ‘Daum enhance the convenience of news consumption’. Essentially the portals, as the major destinations for news seeking audiences, are redistributing news from news organisations including Yonhap, Chosun or JoongAng. Kim also highlighted that Kakao has pre-determined categories from the main page and this is what they prioritise, hinting at a stronger focus toward automation over editorial.

Mixed with cultural edginess though are other unique political-economic traditions, Korea’s new media is deeply influenced by the country’s modern political and economic history. The press had been very tightly controlled under successive authoritarian governments until many restrictions were lifted when the Basic Press Law was repealed in 1987. Democratisation and a more open outlook to global media led to an increase in the range of media sources (local and international) throughout the 1990s.

Yet the Korean press are still subject to direct and indirect pressure from the government, including through criminal defamation and national security laws, leading to international media watchdog Reporters Without Borders ranking Korea in 2019 at 41st in its world press freedom index – an improvement on its 60th ranking in 2018 (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). The press media outlets have generally shaped the mediasphere in terms of fostering party political alignments.

Newspapers in Korea have traditionally been divided along political lines – the leading, mainstream newspapers, *Chosun*, *JoongAng* and *Dong-A*, are generally conservative and broadly supportive of the major Korean business conglomerates, or Chaebol. In return, the Chaebol offered support (in the form of advertising revenue) for favourable (or limits on unfavourable) coverage.

Daniel Tudor, the former Korea correspondent for The Economist, has written that Korean media tends to contribute to an atmosphere of political division. He notes in relation to traditional media: “There are five major national newspapers: *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, *Hankyoreh*, and *Kyunghyang Shimun*. The first three are the most popular, with over two million daily copies sold each. They are also all editorially right-wing. Left-wing critics lump the three together as one, taking the first syllable of their names to make the pejorative composite word *Chojoongdong*

though in reality the *JoongAng* has been perceived as more moderate than the *Chosun* or the *Dong-A*. The *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Shimun* are left-wing and less popular”.

Tudor’s general view of the news media in Korea is that there is only a limited free press and the majority of outlets “lack balance and moderation. They present the same basic news but with different biases”. The power of the Chaebol within Korean society means “harsh criticism of the likes of Samsung or Hyundai is rare in the mainstream media. If 20% of one’s advertising revenue comes from one company, one is very unlikely to criticize that company”.

Online news sources have become more important since the turn of the century and the major Internet portals are considered to be a threat to the business models of the legacy press. Tudor cites the ‘citizen reporter’ news site ‘Ohmynews.com’ as evidence of the existence of a left-wing media. In the intervening years the site met with severe financial problems, with the English language site being shut down and archived.

Overall, the influence of online sources of news poses growing challenges to legacy media and the established institutions with which they are aligned. More than in some other industries (for example, electronics, automobile manufacturing and heavy industry) these upstarts are demonstrating considerable resistance to the usually over-whelming power of the chaebol. Notably, the largest Internet company, Naver, pointedly declined invitations from the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) – composed of the major Korean chaebol – to join the key umbrella industry group. Naver instead remains a member of the Korea Medium Industries Association and publicly states its goal is to support the development of an ‘Internet ecosystem’ and the growth of small and medium businesses.

Most news content still originates from either a newspaper (or similar, i.e. a news magazine) or a news wire service, such as Yonhap. The news portals in Korea do not have newsrooms or any reporting (in fact, their ‘distributor’ legal status prevents them under government regulation from doing so). Professional and personal blogs are still very popular sources of news and information in Korea. Blogs hosted on the portals are typically the most popular for the so-called ‘angry 20-40 year old’ demographic. These are widely read and shared on Twitter and via messaging apps such as Kakao and Line (Naver).

In their analysis of contemporary media pluralism policy in Korea, Youn and Lee note that ‘the media law debates’ of 2008-2010 were basically an ideological conflict over the deregulation between conservative and more progressive media and their party political parallels (Youn & Lee, 2015). This battle was essentially over the power of corporations to shape public opinion in Korea; not surprisingly it continues, and is inevitably framed by neo-liberal discourses of market deregulation. Government agencies formed in the wake of the ‘media law debates’, the Committee on the Impact of Media Concentration and the Media Diversity Committee are now grappling with evaluating the public policy and regulatory implications of this conflict (Youn & Lee, 2015, p. 282).

Conclusion

In terms of media voice pluralism on the portals in Korea, our research indicates a very dynamic media market in Korea, and yet one still dominated by a relatively small set of players. In particular, the power of the portals over everyday news media consumption is very apparent since news is being selected from what is a mature, medium sized national news market, and this means that the pool of news providers inevitably results in a quite concentrated pool; this group are then filtered initially by the portals (and MPEC), and then further winnowed by both human and machine based curation processes.

It has been a turbulent few years in Korean politics, first with the ‘candlelight revolution’ and impeachment of former president, Park Guen Hye, and then disinformation and news manipulation scandals at Naver thought to have contributed to the election of the current president, Moon Jae-In. This led to a major investigation into a key member of Moon’s election team and hacker Kim Dongwon, subsequently found by an independent prosecutor to have manipulated public opinion on a massive scale at the Naver and Nate portals. These events have prompted changes in policies and practices at the portals. Clearly, this kind of hacking and manipulation of news is now a feature of our news media ecologies, with significant consequences for democratic polities around the world.

References

- ACCC. (2018). *Digital Platforms Inquiry: Preliminary Report*. Canberra. Retrieved from <https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/inquiries/digital-platforms-inquiry/preliminary-report>.
- ACCC. (2019). *Digital Platforms Inquiry. Final Report*. 26 July. Canberra. Retrieved from <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report>.
- Algorithmic Watch. (2019). *Automating Society: Taking Stock of Automated Decision-Making in the EU*. Berlin. Retrieved from www.algorithmwatch.org/automating-society
- Barnett, S. (2019, February 14). Cairncross review: Two cheers and two fears for the future of UK journalism. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/cairncross-review-two-cheers-and-two-fears-for-the-future-of-uk-journalism-111658>
- Bärtl, M. (2018). YouTube channels, uploads and views: A statistical analysis of the past 10 years. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24(1), 16-32.
- Bogle, A. (2017). Has the Google of South Korea Found a Way to Save Struggling News Outlets? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/12/naver-news-ad-revenue/547412/>
- Bruns, A. (2018). *Gatewatching and News Curation: Journalism, social media, and the Public Sphere*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cairncross, F. (2019). *Cairncross Review: A Sustainable Future for Journalism*. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf
- Choi, K. (2019). *Personal Interview*. 20 February, 2019. Seoul.
- Civil Rights.org (2019). 'Civil Rights and Tech Advocates Sound Alarm on Racial Bias in Predictive Policing. Retrieved from <https://civilrights.org/2016/08/31/civil-rights-and-tech-advocates-sound-alarm-on-racial-bias-in-predictive-policing/>
- Flew, T., & Dwyer, T. (2019). *Response to ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry Preliminary Report*. Canberra. Retrieved from <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Professor%20Terry%20Flew%20and%20Associate%20Professor%20Tim%20Dwyer%20%28February%202019%29.PDF>
- Forlano, L. (2018). *Invisible Algorithms, Invisible Politics*. Retrieved from <http://www.publicbooks.org/invisible-algorithms-invisible-politics/>
- Giddings, S. (2006). *Walkthrough: Videogames and Technocultural Form*. (PhD dissertation), University of the West of England, Bristol.
- Gillespie, T. (2010). The Politics of Platforms. *New Media and Society*, 12(3), 347-364.
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet. Platforms, Content Moderation, and the*

- Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Helmond, A. (2015). The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready. *Social Media + Society, Online First*, 1-11.
- Kim, D. (2019). Interview with the Director Government Relations & Policy Affairs, Kakao. 19 February.
- Kim, J.-H. (2019, February 19). *Yonhap News Agency Interview* [Interview]. Seoul.
- Kwak, K.S. (2012). *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*. New York: Routledge
- Lee, K., & Joshi, K. (2018). IS Supported Global Information Exchanges in New Media Environments: An Interview with Jin-Gyu Kim, Manager of IT Operation of Yonhap News Agency, Seoul, Korea. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management, 21*(3), 226-228.
- Light, B., Burgess, J. & Duguay, S. (2017). The Walkthrough Method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society Online First* 1–20.
- Lim, J. (2011). First-level and second-level intermedia agenda-setting among major news websites. *Asian Journal of Communication, 21*(2), 167-185.
- Marsden, T. (2017). ‘Google vs Naver. Google’s Struggles – South Korea in Focus’, 13 March. Retrieved from <https://www.minttwist.com/blog/google-vs-naver-googles-struggles-south-korea-focus/>.
- Mochizuki, T. (2019). ‘Yahoo Japan and Line Link Up’, *The Australian (from the WSJ)* 19 November.
- Möller, J., Velde, R. N. v. d., Merten, L., & Puschmann, C. (2019). Explaining Online News Engagement Based on Browsing Behavior: Creatures of Habit? *Social Science Computer Review, Online First*, 1-17. doi:10.1177/0894439319828012
- Media Reform Coalition (2019). *Who Owns the Media?* Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre, Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London.
- Moore, M., & Tambini, D. (Eds) (2018). *Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, M. (2018). *Democracy Hacked: Political Turmoil and Information Warfare in the Digital Age*. London: One World.
- Napoli, P. (2019). *Social Media and the Public Interest: Media Regulation in the Disinformation Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018*. Oxford. Retrieved from <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2019). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*. Oxford. Retrieved from <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>
- Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Park, S., Lee, J. H., & Bae, H. J. (2005). End user searching: A Web log analysis of NAVER,

- a Korean Web search engine. *Library and Information Science Research*, 27(2005), 203-221.
- Pasquale, F. (2015). *The Black Box Society: The secret algorithms that control money and information*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Pasquale, F. (2019) 'The Second Wave of Algorithmic Accountability', Law and Political Economy. 25 November. Retrieved from <https://lpeblog.org/2019/11/25/the-second-wave-of-algorithmic-accountability/>
- Reporters Without Borders (2019). World Press Freedom Index Ranking. Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/ranking?#>
- Shim, J. P., Dekleva, S., French, A. M., & Guo, C. (2012). Social Networking and Social Media in the United States, South Korea, and China. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 30, 1-13.
- Sørensen, J., & Hutchinson, J. (2018). Algorithms and Public Service Media. In G. Lowe, H. V. d. Bulck, & K. Donders (Eds.), *RIPE@2017: Public Service Media in the Networked Society*. Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Spry, D., & Dwyer, T. (2016). *The Representation of Australia in South Korean Online News: October 2014 - April 2015*. A report for the Australia-Korea Foundation, (pp. 1 - 51). Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Spry, D., & Dwyer, T. (2017). Representations of Australia in South Korean online news: a qualitative and quantitative approach utilizing Leximancer and Korean keywords in context. *Quality and Quantity*, 51(3), 1045-1064.
- Statista. (2018). Mobile phone internet user penetration in South Korea from 2015 to 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284204/south-korea-mobile-phone-internet-user-penetration/>.
- Statista. (2019). Kakaotalk <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278846/kakaotalk-monthly-active-users-mau/>
- Tudor, D. (2012). *Korea: The Impossible Country*. China: Tuttle Publishing. pp.167-169.
- Wilding, D., Fray, P., Molitorisz, S., & McKewon, E. (2018). *The Impact of Digital Platforms on News and Journalistic Content*. University of Technology Sydney. Retrieved from <https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/our-research/centre-media-transition/news/impact-digital-platforms-news>.
- Wylie, C. (2019). *Mindf*ck. Inside Cambridge Analytica's Plot to Break the World*. London: Profile Books.
- Yonhap News. (2019). About Yonhap News. Accessed 2 April, 2019. Retrieved from <https://en.yna.co.kr/aboutus/yonhapnews>
- Youn, S. and Lee, H. (2015). 'The Ongoing Media Pluralism Debate in South Korea', in Peggy Valcke et al. (Eds) *Media Pluralism and Diversity: Concepts, Risks, and Global Trends*. Basingstoke, UK and NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zuckerberg, M. (2018). A Blueprint for Content Governance and Enforcement. Retrieved from Facebook Newsroom website: https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/a-blueprint-for-content-governance-and-enforcement/10156443129621634/?hc_location=ufi



Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial Works License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)