

Media advocacy for communication rights in South Korea

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note : This draft paper explains a basic situation of (democratic) media system and media advocacy in South Korea so far. We in MediACT are making the broad framework to intervene in the government's policy and to empower the independent media system and alternative public sphere... in terms of communication rights. So this is not completed yet, please do not distribute it widely.

And This draft paper is based on my presentation paper, "Re-considering Active Audiences: South Korean Experiences in strengthening 'media democracy'", at *Asia Pacific Forum on Active Audiences*, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, June 25-27, 2004.

0. intro : media movements and "communication rights" in Korea

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1. Historical background on the media in Korea

During 1970-80s, South Korea -- under military dictatorship--- experienced rapid economic growth. This growth was based on the sacrifice of working class people and was marked by a lack of basic human rights and democracy. The mainstream media were basically state-controlled and the freedom of expression was limited by the law or by direct order from the government. Under these circumstances, the movement for democracy and human rights began to grow. People used various independent and alternative media to struggle against the oppression. In the field of audio-visual media, there were three major movements:

- (1) viewers' watch-dog groups: they provided critical analysis of the mainstream media, initiated a movement to boycott the public/state broadcasters' viewer fees, organized a media monitoring network, etc.
- (2) trade union movement in the broadcasting and newspaper industries which is now integrated into "the national union of media workers", demanding the press reform and fair and just coverage of the social issues.

(3) independent film and video movement which provided alternative perspectives to the mainstream media coverage about democracy and human rights issues in general.

Since 1987, the year of the June struggle against the dictatorship and August struggle for union organizing, Korean society has been gradually democratizing. With this fundamental social change, the media landscape has also changed. The censorship law on film and video became abolished by a Supreme Court ruling in 1996, and various forms of democratic (or alternative) media became legal and gained importance with the emergence of a variety of social movements. Among others, there debates have emerged about "citizen's broadcasting." The impetus for this were experiences like the establishment of the Hangyere Daily in 1988, a citizen-owned national paper in which the editor-in-chief is directly elected by employees.

However, during the IMF crisis in 1998, when the neo-liberal policies became dominant, another fundamental change became apparent: corporate power in the media has become stronger (although the public service model in the terrestrial broadcasting systems is still in effect). New ICTs were rapidly introduced and broadband internet became part of everyday life (with 80% the highest broadband penetration rate in the world), while economic globalization and neo-liberal policies brought social crises and attacks on basic human rights.

This new situation resulted in new possibilities, challenges and interventions. New media including internet provided greater possibilities for alternative media. This became apparent during the presidential election in 2002 and candle-light demos against the US military. Simultaneous information-sharing, critical debates and discussions by netizens, and others provided effective means for mass mobilization. But these same technologies also brought with them issues such as surveillance, censorship, infringement of privacy, etc.¹

Still, new interventions in the media system were gradually made in the name of strengthening a democratic public sphere. And we have made significant progress in some areas, as outlined below. This was a result of a dynamic interaction between cultural politics, technology and media initiatives connected to social movements.

2. Theoretical Framework

Although a well-grounded conceptual framework is still waiting to be articulated, we can use the following to frame the current structure of the media system.²

1) Independent /alternative Media Sector

¹ E.g. working-place surveillance, electronic residents card, the government's attempts to adopt the real name system into BBS, the National Education Information System, and Entrepreneur Resources Planning to name a few.

² See also Myoungjoon Kim, "Framing the communication rights : Korean context - Brief primer," <World Forum on the Communication Rights> Dec 5, 2003, for discussion of this framework.

We need to secure a media sector for independent/alternative media to make the people's voice heard and nurture varied ways of seeing. Such social communication processes have been ignored by the mainstream media. The key question is through whose eyes you're seeing the world. Not only established mass media but new media like the internet have been used around the world as independent and alternative media.

These media are both materially and ideologically independent from mainstream. They represent media and cultural diversity, and often challenge the established (media) power relationships seriously and radically. Generally speaking, independent/alternative media defensively and preemptively oppose the mainstream media.

By establishing alternative systems and capacities along with strategic and organizing actions, we can expand this media sector. This is the basis for democratizing the media system as described below, by changing the mainstream and establishing a mainstream funded alternative media sector. That is, in order to make democratic progress, we need an independent alternative media sector which is (a) independent of power and capital and (b) has a strong relationship with the progressive social movement-- this relationship includes both solidarity and critical distance.

2) Mainstream (state and corporate) Media Sector

This media sector influences society most massively and immediately, and reproduces the established social relations. Therefore, we need to raise the political pressure to set a more progressive agenda for mainstream media.

There is no need to think (as we used to) that mainstream (state and corporate) media are beyond our arm's reach. There is a big movement working for maximum democratic change in this sector. There are a number of internal and external interventions aimed at changing mainstream media structure. This movement is the reason for the wide range of cooperations and collaborations (not without tensions and conflicts) between media (especially press) trade unions, media reform and media monitoring NGOs, and media activists.

One of the significant changes needed in mainstream media lies in making more acceptable and popular the achievements of the progressive media movement. Eventually, this can lead to a total structural transformation of the mainstream media. This can be fueled by the independent/alternative media sector, especially if it reaches wide audiences, and experiments and accumulates in a *publicly funded alternative media sector*.

3) Publicly Funded Alternative Media Sector

We need to expand society-led public service, and to nurture the democratic media movement in both independent and mainstream media.

For this, a publicly funded alternative media sector must be a site of struggle for various trends to collide and to coexist by temporary negotiation. The main characteristic of this sector should be (a) political independence from state power and the profit-oriented market and (b) financial support from state and market. This can be considered as an overlap of the (1) independent/alternative and (2) mainstream media sectors. That is why I call it the "publicly funded alternative media" sector, although this kind of hybrid concept still needs to be worked out in social reality much more concretely.³

Through a strong publicly funded alternative sector we can hope to change the current bureaucratic and/or commercially dominated media environment into a democratic and participatory one. This sector will provide a space for experimenting with diverse policies and practices that independent/alternative media (sector) could not adopt due to limited resources, and mainstream media failed to attempt due to structural limitations. In addition, it will provide a more formal system for supporting socially progressive media with public resources.

Connecting the three sectors : "Public audio-visual media culture policy"

It is only through the tension, connectedness and organic whole of the three sectors, together with socio-political changes, that the details of a blueprint for media in the future society will be drawn. In this sense, a lot of concrete issues and agendas are being discussed with an eye to the whole.

Especially the last mentioned sector has become a critical arena for media activism since the late 1990's. A new concept has been developed called "Public audio-visual media culture policy, (Gonggong youngsang munwha jungchaek). It covers areas such as public access, local media centers, media education, and independent film and video. All of these are basically non-profit.⁴

3. A few important advances toward a more democratic media system

Since late 1990's, there were new opportunities and challenges for media democracy, some of which were:

- introduction of a public access structure in national public TV, cable and satellite

³ I am considering the publicly funded alternative sector as a practical concept which overcomes the aporia of the matrix of state (control, censorship - vs - freedom of expression) and market (neoliberal privatization - vs - universal service, public access, media diversity).

⁴ We also currently considering Communication Rights as an umbrella concept covering various areas of media and communication. The Communication Rights in the Information Society(CRIS) Campaign provides a similar analysis (in an international perspective) and calls for changes in the media system. See articles by Sea'n O' Siochru', Dorothy Kidd and Sasha Costanza-Chock in "Debating the Strategy for Media Activism : Renewal of agenda + Regeneration of Internationalism," <MediACT's international seminar>, May 14-15th 2004.

- establishment of local media center for public access, independent videos and media education
- media education and media-producing activities expanding to the Korean public at large
- widespread use of internet broadband for social movements and enormous participation and debate, for news archive and live streaming etc.

I'd like to discuss the first three in detail. They work together synergistically, and represent significant advances toward a more democratic media system.

1) Establishing Public Access Structures in Terrestrial/cable/satellite Broadcasting

The campaign for public access in South Korea began as an idea advocated by some activists and professors who were inspired by the examples of public access in other countries, such as the US. When Daejung Kim became president in 1998, it opened up more opportunities for liberal ideas that had not been tolerated in previous governments. In 1999, a new broadcasting law was passed, which was essentially a neo-liberal gift to telecommunication conglomerates, with a few concessions to the demands of the movement for a participatory media system. One of these concessions was public access, specifically in two areas:

(1) establishment of a weekly <Open Channel> program on national public TV system (2001-)

The new law required KBS (Korean Broadcasting System, the major national public broadcaster) to run programs produced by viewers (literally: "viewer-produced participation programs"). However, very few details were specified in the legislation. The Ministry of Culture was given the responsibility for turning this vague concept into reality. The Ministry, rather arbitrarily, decided that 100 minutes per month was adequate. KBS immediately concurred, adding that they would be happy to allow 50 minutes on their radio station and 50 minutes on their television station. At this point, several media activists, who saw where this was heading, decided to take action. They formed the Coalition for Viewer Participation and argued for 100 minutes to a minimum per month on television. Eventually a compromise was reached in which KBS initially agreed to program 30 minutes per week on television (on the KBS-1TV channel, at 4:00 PM every Saturday) and later changed to program 25 minutes per week (at 11:35 PM every Friday).

The selection of programs from among the viewer-producer submissions was left to a subcommittee. This included some activists, but a majority of members are conservative. Although the subcommittee composition is less than ideal and 25 minutes per week is not much, it is still quite a success: This is the major television channel served for 48 million South Korean viewers, and programmed once a week. Another interesting aspect is that you can apply to the subcommittee before you produce your program. If accepted, you are granted \$3-4,000. If your

produced program is accepted to be shown, you receive an additional \$3-4,000. After years of wrangling over these details, the first program was broadcast in May 2002. The flaws in the law and the composition of the subcommittee showed themselves, however. In two cases, important but controversial documentaries were rejected. One of these criticizes the compulsory national fingerprinting system, the other deals with a scandal around a private school for disabled youth. To protest these rejections, demonstrations in front of the KBS building were organized, and recently the sub-committee decided to let the former documentary be aired.

(2) increase of local access programs in cable, satellite and local TV

The second aspect of the legislation concerned cable and satellite operators. Even more vaguely worded, this part of the law states that cable and satellite operators must broadcast viewer produced programs if there is demand and there is no special reason to refuse to do so. The KBC (Korean Broadcasting Commission) was given responsibility for making sense out of this portion of the law. Rather than improving it, the commission made it worse. It decided that cable and satellite operators can edit programs before showing them (provided they discuss the changes with the viewer-producer and they do not alter the basic meaning of the program). In addition, they can refuse viewer-produced programs with "illegal" content. The problem is, in Korea, "illegal content" can mean a lot of things, including saying anything positive about North Korea.

Nevertheless, local media activists from a few cities like Daejeon, Gangneung, Gwangju, etc., have managed to launch local cable access programs (30 - 60 minutes slots). They organized local associations for vitalizing public access, parallel to a national public access movement. Also notable are autonomously-built access structures at local public or private broadcasters, such as "Citizen's Channel" (Jeonju MBC station) and "Guerilla Report" (at iTV). Perhaps one of the best experiments is the radio access program at Masan MBC station, which began in 2000 and lasted for more than 2 years. It was produced mostly by members of the "Kyungnam NGO Association for Audiences," consisting of 16 civil society organizations.

However, most of these experiments have been only possible to the extent that a few media producers in the mainstream system take a personal interest in the project, and enthusiastically help to launch it. So this is not a stable system with a systematic structure and funding.⁵

Regarding the satellite public access channel, RTV (established in 2001), a number of open

⁵ One of these systematic approaches is to establish the public access centers at each area for residents to access, get educated, and make their own program. Recently KBC has such a policy and plans such as building a "Viewer's Media Center." The latter is a plan for an overfunded and poorly planned center in a single area Pusan City. The National Association for Establishing Local Media Centers has severely criticized and intervened in this.

discussions with media activists and policy advocacy are needed because it has been bureaucratically managed.

As a whole, this citizen-participatory broadcasting has great potential for changing the traditional power relationship between the professional sender and the passive receiver little by little. The introduction of the access structure is a significant change in this direction. The law has compulsory articles on public access structure for almost every broadcasting system. It was a result of advocacy by media activists and audiences who argued that media democracy and participatory communication are essential for each sector of the media system. On the basis of more experiences from such experiments with media diversity, we should be able to utilize this system to better effect. This can pave the way for a complete reform of the public broadcasting system, establishing a third sector in broadcasting, by as well as for the people.

All this said, we need more experiments and experiences, and many obstacles and tasks remain. So it still needs strategic work, but it offers the political and philosophical basis for advocating local media centers and critical media education. This is significant progress at this moment.

2) Establishing local media centers as a public service for citizen (2002)

In South Korea, we have developed the concept that media centers are an essential part of the public cultural infrastructure. They are necessary for raising the levels of media literacy in the population at large, which is essential for the 21st century, the era of audio-visual media culture. A media center should include its own independent film theater, and a 'cinematheque' where visitors can watch and talk about a variety of audio-visual material. Equipped with a wide range of tools for the digital media environment, a media center enables ordinary people and independent video-makers to produce their own audio-visual material and to attend critical and creative media education programs. It is also involved in the research, study, collection, management and preservation of existing media resources. In other words, it is a comprehensive media culture center.

(1) MediACT

In Seoul, the KIFV (Association of Korean Independent Film and Video) among other organizations successfully secured support from the KOFIC (Korean Film Commission, the film policy authority) for a Media Access Center for public access activities and independent film and video-making. This first major media center in Korea, called MediACT⁶, was established in May 2002.

⁶ MediACT is a compound word that means 'Media Access Center' and 'Media Activist Center.'

Based on a consensus between KIFV and KOFIC, MediACT is independently managed, and serves as a base-camp for supporting video activism and public access through training programs, rental services with technical support, and research.

With this progress in Seoul, there have been several meetings with important NGOs and video-making organizations throughout the country to discuss the establishment of further local media centers. This is a convergence of trends from various media sectors and activities to democratize the media.

(2) The National Association for the Establishment of Local Media Centers

2001 saw the start of the National Association for the Establishment of Local Media Centers, which now includes around 90 local organizations in 18 cities. More than half of these have their own local associations made up of media monitoring or media (press) reform organizations, independent film and video groups, worker's video collectives and other civil society groups. These are the National Association's 'bottom-up' efforts to increase participatory media activities like public access and critical media education at the local level. On the other hand, KOFIC, the Ministry of Culture, and KBC all have recently formulated a variety of policies 'from above' for establishing local media centers, with lots of problems of course. As a result, the National Association has had to engage in policy advocacy.

So we have developed the National Association into a strong nation-wide activist network for locally establishing media centers based on the MediACT model. However, we are still struggling with structural and capacity issues. These struggles are not limited to those for the establishment of local media centers but for local media democracy in general. It requires empowering citizen-participatory media spaces, by firmly basing them on independent management and stable public funding. Other important issues include:

- Continuing media advocacy and intervention is necessary in government policies. The goal is to get legislation passed that will compel governmental authorities and local governments to assist local media centers with administration and funding.
- A double strategy is needed: Training people to use video as a tool for social change on one hand, and lobbying the authorities to help civil society organizations and video activists on the other.
- These activities to initiate media centers are another good opportunity to strengthen the discussion on local media democracy among trade unions, civil society organizations and independent media activists.

3) Media education to overcome the un-equal structure of media and the social-economic status.

In the late 1970's, the concept of "media education" was first introduced by Catholic priests as a tool for religious activities. Spreading through civil society in the 1980's, media education in this early stage was mostly an awareness-raising campaign against the harmful influences of the media (press and TV), rather than a field of theoretical studies and institutionalized schooling.

A focus of media education till the late 1990's was training monitoring staff for media watchdog activities and to protect children and youth ethically. Of course, as a minor trend, there were not many autonomously planned media production courses by independent video collectives and individuals. As a result, media education has faced the following obstacles and challenges:

- No systematically accumulated advances in curriculum development, teacher training, educational materials
- The typical approach has been the ethical and protectionist one
- Media education is usually one of many activities of certain civil society organizations (such as religious groups, media watchdog groups and press reform organizations). There are not many independent groups or organizations which focus on media education.
- Most media education courses have been carried with very little public support.

But there are a few moments that can be considered as marking a turning point in media education in South Korea. One was the video "Do you really know *jung-ding* (slang word meaning a middle-schooler)", which was made by a middle-school broadcasting group and shown at the 1st Seoul YMCA Youth Video Festival in 1998. It gave our society a shock to see youth represent themselves, with their real problems, with an unprecedented way of seeing and artistic expression. It also made people realize how many young people want to create their own media (video mainly), even in an atmosphere of exam hell. This reflects how many ordinary people already have evolved from passive viewers (consumer) into active creators (producer)--though we cannot say this is the majority.

These newly emerging trends in media literacy are related, on one hand, to the widespread use of digital technology, the rapid growth of the film and multimedia industries and a young generation hooked on a new media culture. On the other, these developments were connected to changes in policy, institutions and funding structures—an overall trend from a bureaucratic and even oppressive political climate to an affirmative one. These changes favored the production-oriented curriculum of media education, with a special focus on training, facilities and equipment for 'audiences as media-producers.'

As the media-saturated culture and the use of the media for a wide range of educational activities grows, so do socio-political interests. Social groups have discovered media education

as a tool for their struggle for leadership and hegemony. For example, the Korean Society for Journalism and Communication Studies(KSJCS) and the Film Studies Association of Korea (FISAK), try to institutionalize media education in the public school curriculum—purely in their own interest, without public education reform and without tackling before-mentioned problems. Unfortunately, this year the Ministry of Culture began to financially support FISAK's sending their university graduates to teach film at public schools, though they are clearly not equipped for the job.

These are media education initiatives started or funded 'from above' by the KBC, the KOFIC, the Foundation for Broadcast Culture (who is a major stockholder of MBC, Munhwa Broadcasting company which is another public one), the Media Academy of the Korean Press Foundation (which is funded by the Ministry of Culture), etc. At the same time, media education 'from below' is growing, with initiatives by civil society organizations, independent film and video makers, media activists (press, broadcasting, internet), and citizen's media groups. (One of best examples is the Buan resident's video collective, which organized itself around the struggle against nuclear disposal facilities). These initiatives from both 'above' and 'below' have made the situation around media education quite complicated.

(1) MediACT's Media Literacy Outreach Project (2003, 2004).

In this situation, we at MediACT feel strongly that an alternative approach to media education should be planned and put into practice based on the following:

- Media education movement, policy, and practice should be part of a larger project of democratizing the media and reforming the public school system.
- Simultaneous consideration of school education and social education (both informal education and Life-long learning) is required
- More attention, activities and public support is needed for the marginalized, the voiceless, etc.

In short, our alternative approach sees the struggle for media literacy as one of overcoming inequalities in the structure of the media and in socio-economic status. Therefore we began to build up our Media Literacy Outreach Project as part of our social education program. This project provides media education for young people in low-income areas, workers, people with disabilities, local women, migrant workers, and the forthcoming project for Buan county' residents and youth. With this we also aim to develop specialized curricula tailored to each marginalized area. Our goal is also to create educational materials in a number of formats (print, audio, visual, audio-visual) and to publish books of our action-cases series for evaluation and wide distribution. We hope the program can be the cornerstone in terms of a new approach to plan and work on the media education for empowering the marginalized, on which other local

media centers and other media education organizations can build, using and adapting it to their localities or fields.

With these activities, MediACT (part of the publicly funded alternative media sector) tries to lead a new (alternative) approach in media literacy and, at the same time, to change the "big picture" of the South Korean media education movement.

4. What communication rights means in South Korea?

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