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### **The Spiral of Invisibility: Social Control in the South Korean Blogosphere**

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# **THE SPIRAL OF INVISIBILITY: SOCIAL CONTROL IN THE SOUTH KOREAN BLOGOSPHERE**

**Jeong Kim**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the growth of the weblog around the world, it is portrayed as one of the most democratic media in history. This paper sets out to rethink the role of the politics of visibility in relation to the spiral of silence theory in shaping the potentially democratic space of blogs. With an emphasis on the socio-cultural context of South Korea, this paper explores how collective social pressure imposes new constraints on the interaction and exchange of opinions in the blogosphere. Based on participant observation at *Ohmynews Blog* service and *Yahoo Korea Blog*, this paper examines how the complexity of self-disclosure through blogging and the gaze of other bloggers affect the interaction and opinion expression. It concludes that the blogosphere, or at least some part of it, is a terrain contested from within, reflecting larger socio-political discourses and cultural currents within which such blog uses are embedded and become culturally appropriated. In relation to the disempowering silence in the Spiral of Silence model, invisibility is both a consequence of disempowerment by others and an empowering experience against visible flaming and social disapproval.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

About 30 years ago, Noelle-Neumann (1984) theorized the Spiral of Silence (SoS), asserting that individuals perceived to hold a minority viewpoint tend to remain silent, whereas those who find themselves to holding a majority viewpoint are more likely to speak up. While her theory has been revisited in relation to the development of the Internet as new spaces for communication and interaction in the last two decades, oddly, its implications for new media research have been neglected (Eum, 2005), especially when considering cross-cultural differences (Scheufele and Moy, 2000). Given the disconnection between the SoS theory and new media research, the blog may offer a useful avenue and means to explore some aspects of potential connections among public opinion theory, new media research, and (cyber)cultural studies. As interpersonal and interactive media become important sources and means of formulating and expressing opinion in everyday life, this paper aims to understand

how the interplay between culture and technology may impose new constraints on opinion expression and interaction.

Research has focused on the democratic potential of blogs to challenge the traditional conventions of journalism and to politically influence decision-making (Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Noh and Lee, 2005; Wall, 2005). Such media-centric comparisons tend to bracket the blog's cultural, social, and material differences by conceptualizing the blogosphere as a unitary, westernized universal space, which is then compared with the Habermassian public sphere. Considering that what was once private is increasingly moving into the public domain through (mediated) public images as well as the technological expansion of the personal sphere of visibility through blogging, it is important to shed light on the public-private dichotomy in the sense of 'the public eye': 'for all eyes to see' or 'visible to all' (Noelle-Neumann, 1984: 230).

Using the concept of the SoS understood here as a spiral of invisibility – that is, as a problematization of self-presentation, opinion expression and interaction in the blogosphere where collective behaviours are very easily counted, but difficult to weigh and evaluate, in this paper an effort is made to rethink the role of the 'politics of visibility' in shaping the interactive space. The conceptualization of a spiral of invisibility opens new theoretical paths to examine the complexities of the technical and socio-psychological conditions of visibility expressed as the politics of visibility in the blogosphere. The aim in this paper is to assess the socio-cultural implications and complications of the newly acquired visibility of the self to the public in the context of South Korea where anti-Japanese and anti-U.S. sentiments remain prevalent both in everyday life and in politics. As part of a larger research project in progress, the paper is based on a case study of two Korean bloggers who post their diaries online.

First, in the next section, the conceptual framework of the politics of visibility is outlined, particularly in relation to electronic media and opinion expression. The particularities of the Korean blogosphere are then outlined in the third section to illustrate its culture within which the technology is embedded, incorporating suggestions about how blog interactions are appropriated in this specific cultural context. In the fourth section, it is argued that the politics of visibility needs careful management not only for the success of a blog, but also for managing a chain of events which may unfold in unpredictable or uncontrollable ways through the interactivity of opinion and self-disclosure. In relation to the disempowering silence in the SoS model, it is concluded that invisibility is both a consequence of disempowerment by others and an adaptive strategy to the politics of visibility in the blogosphere.

## **2. THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE**

In examining the intricate relation between environmental factors and interactivity in the blogosphere, the SoS provides a useful conceptual framework to make a connection between the information environment and the expression of opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1984: 42) argues:

The individual members of society constantly observe their environment, in order to see which opinions and modes of behaviours will win the approval of society and which will lead to their isolation. When there is only low visibility, there is [a] tendency for people to conceal their position in public, making this position appear even weaker than it really is and prompting others to fall silent.

Implicit in her claim regarding the effects of the fear of isolation in public opinion formation is the assumption that making one's voice visible against the majority is potentially disempowering as a result of collective discursive control. The reason is that, instead of openly voicing against the majority opinion, one passively adopts the subordinated position of silencing the self and conforms to the majority view in order to avoid the risk of social isolation. Not surprisingly, there are various objections to Noelle-Neumann's theory. For instance, individuals may misperceive the climate of opinion (Tichenor and Wackman, 1973), while a mere willingness to speak out does not necessarily lead to an actual expression of opinion (Petric and Pinter, 2001). Furthermore, Salmon and Kline (1985) point out that the SoS theory ignores positive rewards for speaking out. However, there is also some evidence that people's perceptions of majority opinions affect their opinion expression in practice (Glynn, et al., 1997), even online (Eum, 2005).

Since SoS theory focuses on the effects of mass media on the formation and expression of public opinion without taking into consideration the potential role of interactive media via the Internet in the process, there is a disconnection between Noelle-Neumann's media-centric theory and its applicability to blogs. Yet, for a number of reasons, SoS theory provides insight into the relationship between the information environment and opinion expression in the blogosphere as a discursive space occupied by bloggers and as a social process of interaction and interconnection through texts. First, her emphasis on the public – in the sense of the public eye – is useful in grasping the blurred boundaries between the private and public in the blogosphere where private opinion expressed on a blog becomes publicly expressed opinion as

a result of the nature of the medium. A view that most blog practices can be conceived as visibly described discourse (Couldry, 2003: 130) works in parallel with Noelle-Neumann's conceptualization of public opinion - that is, value-related opinions can be visibly expressed without a risk of social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1984: 230) - in a society where public images are more important than the public sphere, as argued by Virilio (1993).

However, visibility in the blogosphere where individuals publish and publicize their opinions is a complex issue. Individuals not only look outwards to their immediate virtual and real environments, but also take into account that they are looked at by anonymous surfers. In contrast to the invisible fear of isolation and a willingness to speak out behind a screen, actual threats, criticisms, and opinion expression may be more visibly explicit, long lasting, and more easily counted in the blogosphere. Thus, the blog with interconnected links and audiences may provide a more immediate climate of opinion as an information environment. These offline and online distinctions open new paths for grasping how these technical conditions of visibility characterize the interactivity in the blogosphere. What needs to be emphasized here is the politics of visibility or the interplay between 'struggles for', and 'struggles by', visibility - that is, the need and desire to achieve the capacity to be seen, and the socio-political, as well as cultural, consequences of the newly afforded visibility with limits of control - in the interactivity of the blogosphere. The limited control of visibility may become the source of new and distinctive kinds of struggles in the form of asocial isolation and threats that, on occasion, work against bloggers themselves, thus requiring them to make careful choices, whether political or personal.

Thompson (1995: 247) argues that in media-saturated societies where the transformation of visibility through a rise of mediated publicness takes place, 'struggles for recognition have increasingly become constituted as struggles for visibility. The struggle to make oneself [seen] is [a central] aspect of the social and political upheavals of the modern world.' The electronic media publicize the details of actions of the powerful few; thus, the many are able to watch and judge the few - such as politicians or celebrities - through the eyes of television. Mathiesen (1997: 219) calls this 'a viewer society', or 'synopticon'. In contrast to television, blogs provide another space of struggles for visibility where ordinary individuals with a means to escape from their normal invisibility in the media by displaying personal thoughts and experiences to public audiences: a space where the many see the many. A large fraction of blogs will remain invisible with limited interconnected links; however, they may occasionally reach a wide audience. In the blogosphere where a successful measure of recognition is

considered to be interconnected links and page views, struggles for visibility are crucial for the popularity of a blog.

Despite the evidence that most blogs are intimate forms of personal diaries (Herring, et al., 2006), serving the purpose of personal expression to an audience (Papacharissi, 2006), these studies do not take into account how blogs are co-produced in the process of interaction with audiences. Couldry (2003) argues that the culturally powerful practices of watching in our culture of confession through the media invites individuals to see an expanding range of what Goffman (1959: 23) calls backstage behaviours. In Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, people give different performances to create socially meaningful impressions on the front stage in the presence of audiences and backstage in their absence. In the blog as one's virtual front stage on which some aspects of the backstage are disclosed, an inherent difficulty is controlling the impression one gives in the process of self-presentation and interaction online. A limited control over information flow and the interpretive context in which the audience encounters the content may become a new source of risk to struggles by visibility. This is especially so, considering the fact that bloggers have difficulty in negotiating boundaries for privacy and/or anonymity in a process where the private action becomes the public spectacle. In spaces of flows where popular blogs become targets of larger numbers of spectators this process becomes reproduced, open-ended, and even normalized from within, as the rapid growth of blogs generates decentralized socio-technical synoptic conditions where visibility itself is a means of social control (Mathiesen, 1997).

The danger of self-disclosure lies in the prevailing nature of online identity, whether authentic or not, with the type of personal data available on blogs: personal pictures, contact information, and personal diaries. It may be problematic to conceal one's identity or position at a fixed URL, which is under observation by indefinite, indeterminate, and invisible others. As Tetzlaff (2000) argues in the case of fixed identities in homepages, and as Herring et al. (2006) suggest in their longitudinal study, most blogs contain some identifiable information, although the later study was limited to English-language blogs. Thus, unlike Turkle's (1995:10) deconstructive claim, concealing oneself may not be easy for blog authors, since the blurred boundaries between social-psychological aspects of private and the technological aspects of the public, between virtuality and reality, and between opinion and action, make it difficult to distinguish between '*being* anonymous and *feeling* anonymous' (Kennedy, 2006: 866).

The complexities of struggles for and struggles by visibility which affect each other, require careful management of the personal sphere of visibility at an individual level and this has socio-political implications. This is paradoxical, since a certain degree of visibility needs to be achieved for the popularity of a blog, while simultaneously this very visibility serves as a means of social control in the Foucauldian sense. This may be a limiting factor for individuals with respect to opinion expression. For instance, beginning in July 2007, a real-name policy requires Internet users in Korea to provide their identification data and to use their real names for posting comments on web sites run by Internet portals, media outlets, and government agencies with more than 100,000 daily visitors. By making the web more transparent, this policy is designed to enhance the deliberative potential of cyberspace in an attempt to prevent posting *akpeul* – deliberately hostile and insulting comments – behind the shelter of anonymity.

Concerning visual control, Lyon (2006: 47) argues that the synoptic and Foucauldian panoptic societies are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing through mass media and surveillance technology: 'The many watching the few gives grounds for legitimating the watching of the many by the few.' Additionally, transparency on the web principally legitimates the many watching the many from within. Visibility without anonymity arguably provides a technological condition for visual control over the freedom of expression on the web at large by reinforcing parallel synoptic and panoptic processes from within. In practice, evidence suggests that anonymity contributes to more aggressive and diverse expression, while a lack of anonymity increases the fear of isolation, consequently negatively affecting interaction on online discussion forums (Eum, 2005).

Although greater visibility does not in itself necessarily imply greater struggles, it increases the risk of such struggles. How, then, can we analyze the features of the paradoxical interplay between struggles for and struggles by visibility? How can we make a connection between the SoS and the interactivity of opinion in the blogosphere? The existence of a new technological platform does not by itself define or explain how it is used. Before offering a detailed analysis of the two cases examined in this paper, an understanding of the cultural particularities of blogging in the socio-political context of South Korea is necessary.

### **3. BLOGS IN KOREA**



Korea is one of the most wired nations; a survey of computer and Internet use shows that 74.1% of the Korean population uses the Internet, and that 73.4% of Internet users in their 20s use or have used blogs, using these 14.1 times per week. What is important to note in this regard is the heavy dependence on blog portals (Ministry of Information and Communication, 2006). As of April 2006, the most popular blog portal service *Cyworld* and the most popular search engine *Naver*, attracted 6 and 4 million visitors on a daily basis, respectively. By contrast, the most widely used non-portal blog service *Egloos* had 140,000 daily users (Kim and Bae, 2006). The benefit of using blog services provided by Internet portals as umbrella sites is that they potentially offer higher traffic on individual blogs by allowing them to be connected to wider networks.

Reflecting the popularity of the blog, there is a growing stream of blog research concerning user gratification (Park and Cho, 2004), the relations between blogs and the pre-existing media (Noh and Lee, 2005), and their potential as a communication medium (Kwon and Woo, 2005). In the findings from these studies there is little evidence of the journalistic potential of the blog. The findings indicate social interaction as an important motivation for blogging. Kim (2004b) found, for example, that blogs provide privatized spaces for the Korean approach to social networking. Kwon and Woo (2005: 459) also concluded that Korean bloggers are 'most satisfied' with new opportunities for 'social interaction' and 'constructing self-identity.' Likewise, the most important motivation for blogging was found to be pride in having one's own space for self-expression, with the number of visitors and comments indicating the degree of approval from audiences (Park and Cho, 2004).

An important aspect of cyberculture in Korea is *datgeul* (comment) *munhwa* (culture), or the culture of commentary. Posting *datgeul* on blogs or online news articles is seen as a measure of social recognition. Not only does *datgeul* offer an interactive means to participate in the formation of public opinion, but it is also increasingly being considered to represent public opinion (Kim and Sun, 2006) with potential effects on personal opinion (Jeong and Kim, 2006). Among other factors, the conflictual nature of society and of the political sphere are also important factors which give rise to the potential for inflammatory language as an outcome which emerges through exposing *datgeul* (Kim, 2004a).

The contradictory significance of *datgeul* for blogging is reflected in what bloggers jokingly call, *moopeul yi akpeul* or 'no comment', which is regarded as an unfavourable or derogatory

comment, indicating that posting no comment is as inappropriate as flaming. The phrase reveals bloggers' preference for receiving visible attention rather than remaining unattended, even if such attention may cause flaming in parallel with the co-existence of struggles for and struggles by visibility. Coupled with *datgeul munwha*, the culture of collectivism offline is reproduced in cyberspace (Kim, 2004c). Despite its positive contribution to the bottom-up agenda-setting process as means of fostering collective intelligence (Kim and Lee, 2006), a recurring phenomenon known as cyber-witch-hunting in connection with *akpeul* practices takes place through a process where deviation from what is considered *normal* becomes a target for collective criticism without providing much room for reflexive deliberation. For instance, 13,000 comments, which were largely criticism for her misbehaviour, were posted by bloggers within the few hours after the initial blog post of a picture of an incident where a woman allegedly refused to clean up when her dog defecated on the floor of a subway. This incident led to the coining of the neologism *Dog Poop Girl*. Following this brief introduction to *datgeul munwha*, I next discuss how these (cyber)cultural particularities may interplay with opinion expression and interaction in the blogosphere in the context of recently developed anti-U.S. sentiment and historical anti-Japanese sentiment.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Since I started lurking<sup>1</sup> in two blogospheres in July 2006, a number of individualized blog communities that were particularly interactive were identified by using blogrolls and by random blog searches within each of the blog services. Prior to lurking, a personal blog was created at each blog service with almost identical content – ranging from daily thoughts, socio-political discussions, and reflection on my research progress without in-depth scholarly discussion. Two informants, Joyride (<http://kr.blog.yahoo.com/siyo0n00>) at *Yahoo Korea Blog* and Sophie<sup>2</sup> at *Ohmynews*, are noteworthy for their outspokenness in favour of Japanese and American culture in the face of continuous collective disapproval by anonymous visitors. Their continuing interest in posting pro-American and pro-Japanese contents was deemed to be controversial in a climate of the development of anti-American sentiment in recent years and historically deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea<sup>3</sup>. The nature of their blog posts appears to be consistent with Noelle-Neumann's hypothesis – that is only controversial topics can trigger a spiral of silence. Thus, these ideologically polarized topics provide a rich context for an analysis of features of blogger interaction.

Furthermore, two blog services were selected as they provide contrasting contexts for the analysis. Song (2007) found that *Ohmynews*, an ideologically progressive online newspaper with the motto 'every citizen is a reporter,' portrays the anti-American sentiment in a positive frame. Given its ideological position and homogenous progressive readership (Yoo, 2005), it was reasoned that 'homophily' or in-group favouritism (Wilhelm, 2000: 89) among bloggers would be stronger at the *Ohmynews Blog* service than at *Yahoo*. By contrast, the *Yahoo Korea Blog*, whose parent company is based in the U.S., was expected to attract more culturally and demographically heterogeneous membership with higher traffic than *Ohmynews* bloggers who are mostly in their 30s and 40s (personal interview with *Ohmynews*, 02/23/07).

Since my interaction began after two months of lurking, it was judged best to reciprocate self-disclosure to build trust, to create more comfortable spaces for the informants to share their experiences, given the sensitivity of the research focus (Joinson, 2005; Moon, 2000). The

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<sup>1</sup> Lurking refers to reading posts and comments without participation in interactive communication with blog authors or visitors/surfers.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie's blog URL is not provided, since her blog is no longer available at *Ohmynews Blog Service*. A pseudonym was used for her name in order to protect her identity for ethical reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Since the liberation from 36 years of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the manipulation of public antagonism toward Japan has been the common denominator of politics in postwar Korea. See Cheong, S. W. (1991). *The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea*. London: Greenwood Press.

informants were reminded about my presence as a researcher visiting the blogs and gave their informed consent. Voluntary interaction was ensured with scope for withdrawal from the study at any time. Interactions took place in the form of posting comments both publicly and privately by using 'secret comment' or *guitsokmal* – password-secluded dialogic interaction, without being publicly seen when commenting. Thus, the blog was both a site and a means of data collection in its natural setting. These individuals treated me as a researcher at first, and then as a blogger as interaction grew.

Despite the strengths of the blog for understanding the mode of interaction in its natural context through the symmetric mode of communication with bloggers, participant observation online is inevitably partial (Hine, 2000). Thus, instead of relying on one method, I employed 'multiple modes of data collection' (Stewart, 1998: 28) in addition to keeping a journal as fieldnotes, taking screenshots, and archiving. During the 8 months of participant observation, there were a total of 16 email exchanges in the format of informal interviews, which were supplemented by semi-structured follow-up interviews. The interview with Joyride was conducted on *Microsoft Messenger (MSN)*, while the interview with Sophie was conducted on the phone at her request. The reason for such a small number of email exchanges was that there were also ongoing interactions through blogging.

Researching blog spaces where the presentation of the self, and the construction of subjectivity and online identity take place, raises concerns about the quality of data – the authenticity of bloggers and their blog posts. The use of multiple modes of data collection is not used to judge authenticity, but to enhance understanding and interpretation of the data. What is important is to understand how bloggers themselves judge authenticity as a situationally constructed, negotiated, and sustained performance. Through email exchanges and follow-up interviews I was able to reflexively and retrospectively check posted assertions and opinions in the light of the socio-psychological experiences of the individuals in their real backstage lives behind the computer screen.

## 5. ENVISIONING INVISIBILITY

As a recent Korean immigrant and a mother of three, residing in New York City, Sophie missed social interactions with other Koreans. She desired a space for self-expression through her blog, and (mediated) interaction with others. Thus, she started her own blog at *Ohmynews* in July 2006. The content of her blog expressed her interest in painting, reasons for immigration, and thoughts on Korean social issues such as the educational system, masculine culture, and sexuality. With her detailed descriptions of her inner feelings, and with the ensuing controversy, she has consistently appeared as one of the most viewed and commented bloggers on the front page of *Ohmynews Blog*.

Despite her reputation, she attempted to *be* anonymous by posting personal thoughts and experiences without disclosing her private information including photos of herself. Regarding exposing herself, she expressed her concern: 'If I posted my own pictures (on my blog), it would really make me feel like I was naked in front of a mass audience' (posting<sup>4</sup>, 11/17/2006). On the surface, there was no sign of intended identity play behind her anonymity. Consistent with her offline identity, she wanted to retain her own voice by openly and reflexively expressing her thoughts and experiences in her retrospective diaries with a desire to avoid inconsistency and discrepancy. However, as Kennedy (2006: 866) argues in relation to personal homepages, there is a discrepancy, in that Sophie was not as anonymous as she felt she was, since the detailed description of her thoughts and feelings had been made public, making her offline identity evident.

Papacharissi (2006: 35) notes that blogs allow us to 'privatize a portion of the public sphere.' Additionally, blogs politicize the private domain, as the non-reciprocal relationship between the observer and the observed with 'reduction in anonymity is associated with an increase in the potential vulnerability following candid self-disclosure' (Joinson, 2005: 33). Despite Sophie's intended selective self-disclosure, the disparity in parallel with the constant visibility of her blog has created a struggle with regard to opinion expression. Although it is not evident that the disparity in anonymity between registered and non-registered visitors/surfers affects interactivity, she considers that commenting from a position of anonymity is unfair, especially with respect to comments made invisible by using *guitsokmal*. For instance, she responded online to an anonymous *guitsokmal*, which was supposedly insulting,

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<sup>4</sup> All excerpts from interviews, blog posts, and comments are translated into English by the author. All comments excerpted for Joyride here are from nicknamed anonymous visitors.

I just deleted *datgeul* some man wrote because it was complete trash. It was more like things written in public washrooms. Worthless, those things that should not even be talked about. (posting, 11/26/2006)

By posting this comment, she publicly warns the invisible others about her dissatisfaction with nonreciprocal interaction. Moreover, Sophie continued to delete anonymous comments or publicly mock *guitsokmal* unless they made sense to her. She later expressed her concern, 'I do not like to deal with comments written by anonymous visitors. Dealing with them is stressful, although not everyone is like that' (phone interview, 03/26/07).

Although it may start out innocently, the curiosity of looking becomes even an intrusive and/or controlling gaze, as Lyon puts it in the case of mass media (2006). Sophie experienced an unmediated psychological pressure as a result of the mediated interaction. The 13-hour difference between New York and Korea was a constant source of psychological pressure. Since during the night in New York she would be anxiously anticipating what others would have to say during the day in Korea, Sophie reported that she had difficulty sleeping. The constant visibility of her blog put her in a position where she could only be reactive rather than preventive with respect to what others had to say. However, a more deeply rooted problem was the non-reciprocity of visibility – that is, her incapacity to monitor those who were monitoring her.

Despite the evidence that bloggers are not too concerned with audience response (Papacharissi, 2006), it remains important to investigate how bloggers react to the different tones of voice expressed by audiences: logical argument, symbolic degradation without flaming, and flaming. More fundamentally, what appears to make Sophie's blogging experience dissatisfying for her is contextual as well as technological. Her struggle was deeply rooted in the homogenous culture, which partially reflected anti-American sentiment at the *Ohmynews* blog community into which she felt she did not fit. Legitimately or not, her subjective criticism of Korean masculine culture and discussion of her perception of sex in direct comparison to her new life in the U.S. were deemed inappropriate by a group of bloggers. At one point Sophie posted:

A Korean way of having sex is stationary, like a perfectly round soccer ball. An American way of having sex is more dynamic and faster, like the shape of an American football. For Americans, playing a game or having sex without a sense of achievement is dull. ... The way of life is different. A Korean way of having sex is more lasting and enduring. An

American way of having sex is impatient and less enduring, just like the differences between soccer and football. (posting, 10/06/2006)

Within a few hours, comments were posted both by anonymous visitors and registered bloggers whose blog links were identifiable:

Why do you talk about your sex life in public? This is not America...(unidentifiable blogger, 10/06/2006)

No matter what you say about American culture, remember you are Korean. (anonymous visitor 1, 10/07/2006)

I don't think you should be writing about America or even about English. This is Korea. Before talking about English or American culture, learn more about Korean history, and the language. I don't particularly like the way you praise American culture. In the end, you left Korea because you had no choice. (anonymous visitor 2, 10/07/2006)

After a series of comments exchanged, some of Sophie's supporters joined the discussion to help her defend her position. However, without ever reaching a conclusion or an agreement, the discussion continued to focus on the subjective matter of what could be publicly posted and what not in the context of anti-American sentiment. She learned to ignore personal remarks, while publicly showing appreciation to many supporters. Yet, the sense of disapproval and rejection between *us* as Koreans versus *them* as Americans remained a constant struggle. Following Foucault (1981), discursive practices of writing, speaking, and thinking work in both inhibiting and productive ways. For him, commentary allows the endless construction of new discourses, opening the possibility of speaking, while, by a rejection rather than a straightforward prohibition, commentary also functions as an internal system of exclusion. The commentary of polarized rejection can be linked to what Foucault (1981: 61) terms the 'rarefaction of speaking subject' influencing who can speak and who cannot, in turn, leading to the loss of alternative voice. Considering the claims in blog comments, then, *who* decides *what* could or should be written on private blogs?

Keren (2006: 28) asserts that the development of emotional bonds by linking to each other's blogs is 'a new version of collectivism' for simultaneous participation in the same endeavours. My own observations and my interview with Sophie support this claim. In a way, Sophie received her own personal webs of support with a relatively high level of readership. However, she indicated that she felt isolated by certain individuals who formed their own community around their blogs, collectively expressing anti-American sentiment by revisiting her blog and

posting more comments. Given that posting comments on comments is a key form of interaction in the blogosphere, it was only to be expected that the exchange of opinions attracted more attention, which she did not appreciate.

I wanted to show *them* there is a different world out there. At first, I tried hard to get used to the environment at *Ohmynews*, for my own pride as well. But, later, I felt I was isolated. You know *pum-at-jī*<sup>5</sup>? Some people blog together. It was very difficult [to get along]. (phone interview, 03/26/2007)

The blog is a medium which is co-produced and archived through interaction between the author and audiences without entirely finishing it. In the process of co-production, for Sophie, social reality was perceived as the sum of what people had to say rather than the overall pattern of interaction. As the saying goes, *whomever's voice is the loudest wins an argument*; the most visible voice wins an argument online.

Initially I did not know much about the political culture of the blog site. I did not know anything about what I could or should write on my blog. I guess I was overly open-minded or even naive. Despite the harsh comments, sometimes unbearable and too personal, I continued.... But it was really stressful.... (phone interview, 03/26/2007)

As a recent immigrant to an unfamiliar *place*, she needed a *space* to express herself through writing for therapeutic comfort: a space of acceptance through interaction, but not in virtual isolation and disapproval. *Ohmynews* describes its blog service as 'My far-reaching voice.' Her blog was technologically well connected, and far-reaching, yet could not amount to a socially shared space, if it was not accepted within its culture. It was not a matter of prohibition, but more of division and rejection through blurred boundaries between the private and public, between the virtual and real, and between being and feeling anonymous. Although it is unclear whether Sophie spent enough time in the blogosphere or asserted her voice too strongly, the constant visibility of disapproval, along with the inability to prevent it, was rather uncomfortable. In late December 2006, along with three other bloggers who had been supportive, Sophie decided to discontinue her blog at *Ohmynews* and to find a new blog service. The interactivity of the blog appears to promise democratic potential for expressing an alternative voice; however, to a certain extent, it also becomes a space to isolate individuals from competing views from within, leading to the loss of alternative voices.

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<sup>5</sup> A traditional way of collective exchange of labour for sharing work within a group of individuals in rural communities, when needed for harvesting.



## 6. INVISIBILITY AS EMPOWERMENT

In comparison to Sophie's experience, struggles by visibility are more evident in the case of Joyride. Since Joyride started his blog in August 2004, it has attracted about 1.5 million visitors with 600 subscribers and 8,000 comments in total. Along with personal diaries, family photos, and personal information such as his email address, he posts a cartoon-series *Joy, the Japan Doctor: as I saw and experienced*, which illustrates positive aspects of Japanese society – ranging from mobile phones, marriage rituals, making ramen noodles, and etiquette – based on his numerous trips to Japan. As of April 2007, there were 20 cartoons posted, which directly compare the two cultures and criticize how certain individuals blindly uphold national pride over other values. With an average of a hundred comments for each cartoon, one cartoon with the provocative title '*We aren't the best!*' drew the most interactions. With a degree of cynicism, Joyride expresses,

Since some people think they are better than other people, they are not considerate of others, resulting in interpersonal conflicts.... Self-centered Koreans who think they are better [than others] look down on Japanese, entirely. They don't admit that there are certain things from which we could learn, because they think *we* [as Koreans] are the best in the world.... Indeed, we are not all that [good]. Be open-minded, learn from the Japanese. I hope that the Japan-Korea relations get better. (Joyride posting, 09/22/2006, my emphasis)

Within minutes of the initial posting, comments flowed in – largely questioning his nationality, identity, patriotism, and intelligence. Siegel et al. (1986) argued that the invisibility of social cues leads to dis-individuation or de-individuation. In line with this classic claim, the debate through chains of comments is characterized by a degree of collective disapproval, cynicism, and symbolic degradations, while reflecting historically deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment. Surprisingly, acknowledging *akpeul* as unethical practice, certain audience members expressed their concerns: 'it will be chaotic again. There will be hundreds of comments....' (Agui, 09/22/2006). As expected, almost 500 comments were posted within the first four days.

The title of the cartoon series implies that Joyride's view is subjective and personal rather than objective. Yet, a majority of respondents did not make room for negotiation of the private-public boundary as they persisted in historical antagonism without concern for the quality of argument.

What a Japanese fanatic. (seokyodong meutjaengyi, 09/25/2006)

I don't think you understand why we [as Koreans] don't like Japan, it is because of the past. It has not yet been a hundred years or a thousand years since the independence.... They are still enemies who killed our ancestors.... (daehanminkook!!, 09/26/2006)

Is Japan a heaven? Move to Japan. (merong, 09/26/ 2006)

It is important to note that certain comments critically reflect on both perspectives of the argument with an intention to advance the discussion. Others perceive the discussion as illogical reasoning:

Unconditional anti-Japanese sentiment must GO! But, I don't think your criticism makes logical sense either. It is shallow and subjective. (lala, 09/25/2006)

You guys make me laugh, because your replies [comments] reflect your level of intelligence. Besides Western bulletin boards, I sometimes use Japanese and German online discussion sites. I have not seen anything like this, using foul language and *akpeul*.... (naguine, 09/26/2006)

Despite the self-conscious efforts by supporters to moderate interaction, derogatory comments continued to increase in the absence of a moderator. For the first three days, Joyride remained active in defending his position against emotional criticism made from an anonymous standpoint. For example,

If I wanted to receive favorable comments, I would not have posted my cartoons. I would have titled, 'Korea is the Best~'.... Why don't you use more persuasive arguments without picking at everything I say? Stop hiding behind anonymity. ^^ [smiley] (Joyride, posting, 09/25/2006)

However, the more he responded to comments, the more this paradoxically provided grounds for certain audiences to revisit the blog and for collective scrutiny. According to Kaye (2006: 141), bloggers 'enjoy exposing others for wrong information, for biases and for illogical and inconsistent stances, and they like to make fun of others' opinions and attitudes.' Such behaviours are further imposed from within, as in an echo chamber: 'When I respond, they love it. They pick on every detail [of my comment]. I won't respond anymore, it is scary' (Joyride, email interview, 03/15/2007).

Borrowing from Bohman (2004: 138), 'While anonymity promotes freedom of expression under certain circumstances, it changes the expectation of communication by making speaker and audiences not only indefinite but also indeterminate in its many-to-many form.' Likewise, for Joyride, who is speaking is obscured as is to whom to respond with an indefinite audience

and little room for expressive differences to be publicly seen. In a technological environment where the collective voice is visibly counted, seeing becomes believing, and may become judgmental.

I think the way Koreans perceive blogs is very unique. They think what is seen on a blog is all there is. When there is discrepancy between what they think (offline) and what they see (online), it comes intolerable for them. I cannot fight back. It is one-to-many, I don't have resources to fight back. (Joyride, MSN interview, 04/03/2007).

Joyride speculates that there are hundreds of anti-fans. Not only are these people with whom he does not want to argue, but also they act as intolerable watchdogs that instantly refute the claims in Joyride's blog by posting their opinions. In this respect, the technological freedom of one-to-many communication through blogging seems to bring about many-to-one synoptic pressure.

What is publicly invisible behind the backstage is extreme, yet not unusual. In contrast to what Castells (1996) envisaged, the power of flows becomes a disempowering experience. With personal information such as an email address disclosed, struggles by visibility are evident in that Joyride reports receiving 50-100 emails ranging from personal threats to symbolic degradation of his wife as a traitor. According to Joyride, certain anonymous individuals visit blogs on his blogroll to comment, 'Don't be friends with Joyride', or repeatedly post inflammatory messages about him (MSN interview: 04/03/2007). During the participant observation, such personally degrading messages were occasionally found at different blog services beyond Joyride's personal realm. With the availability of archived posts and comments, which may function as a 'collective memory' for tracking previous posts and interaction (Lee, 2005: 55), hiding his position becomes almost impossible unless the archive is completely deleted. Joyride laments, 'I never knew how scary indeterminate masses could be, but it is too late now, isn't it?' (Joyride, MSN interview, 04/03/2007). In the face of a stream of dis-individualizing comments and *akpeul*, he concurs with what Lee (2005: 53) found in his study of online discussion groups: 'a normalization of flaming as an unfortunate, but acceptable interactional category.'

Instead of complete withdrawal, in February 2007, Joyride took an active approach to control the external pressure imposed through anonymous, but visible, *akpeul* practices by technically rendering them invisible at the expense of losing one of the core characteristics of the blog – the interactivity and the communicative functions of anonymity. When it is unclear *who* is

speaking, it was judged best not to know *what* they are speaking. Anonymity online appears to be structural and empowering under certain circumstances; however, anonymity employed to enable the freedom and diversity of speech is not mutually empowering when it is structurally nonreciprocal, both in terms of its quality and the quantity of audiences.

Although Joyride stated that he felt more comfortable since the disappearance of interaction, a month later, he re-enabled the interactivity for a simple reason – *Moopeul yi akpeul*, seeking positive comments at the cost of facing flaming. However, there have been two major changes in his interactivity. First, Joyride completely disengaged in interaction in order to avoid unbalanced one-to-many interactivity. Second, his critical voice has been relatively toned down – for instance, by incorporating how well Korean electronic companies are positioning themselves in the global market against Japanese corporations in one cartoon (03/02/2007). Some supporters sympathetically expressed their disappointment, 'Strangely, the author is not as critical. He lowered his tail, too many people here and there saying bad things about him' (hahaha, 03/02/2007). When asked about this, Joyride answered, 'I gave up [on dealing with them]' (MSN interview, 04/03/2007). On the one hand, such changes reflect Noelle-Neumann's (1984) assumption about the fear of isolation expressed in the form of struggles for visibility, while they also imply the burden of unnecessary attention in the form of struggles by visibility. On the other hand, this indicates a negotiated approach to balance struggles for and struggles by visibility without being caught in a flame war through the power of silence.

The presence of historically deeply rooted anti-Japanese sentiments in the case of Joyride sheds new light on collective flaming and disagreement beyond the effects of homophily within an immediate information environment. The open-ended, dialogical, and decentralized mode of communication through the blog appears to make it possible to form collective action through opinion expression based on collective memory even in an ambiguous informational environment without clear signs of in-group favouritism. Unlike in the blog community organized based on progressive readership at *Ohmynews*, anti-Japanese sentiments in a general sense on *Yahoo* appear to be sufficient to produce collective pressure.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This paper has attempted to show the role of the politics of visibility in shaping the interactivity of opinion and self-disclosure in blogs. It has examined how the interplay between socio-psychological aspects of private and technical aspects of public adds a great degree of complexity to the interactivity and expression of opinion. Being visible or anonymous online is not a mutually exclusive, but negotiated condition, which requires the management of revelation in specific socio-technical contexts. In relation to the disempowering silence in the SoS, for Sophie and Joyride, invisibility is both a consequence of disempowerment by others and an empowering experience against visible flaming and social disapproval. Incompatibility with an indefinite, indeterminate, and, sometimes, invisible audience is overcome by the same technology that is used to impose silence from within. The informants have been shown to employ adaptive strategies to the paradoxical interplay of struggles for and struggle by visibility in order to wall off unwanted and conflictual comments and opinions. In addition to: 1) active ignorance of *akpeul* or disapproval; and 2) active defence of one's position or denouncing flaming, other strategies, which could be overlapping, are: 3) selective interaction by deleting unfavourable comments; 4) technologically disabling interactivity; 5) withdrawal from interaction; and 6) withdrawal from the blogosphere all together. Thus, an inflammatory condition and socio-psychological pressure do not always lead to the loss of a blogger at one level. Moreover, these adaptive strategies are not all inclusive or universally undertaken, but rather they are informed by the specific cultural context in which they occur.

Since the blog gains its strength as its interconnected links grow, the blogosphere is characterized by the reciprocal juxtaposition of visibility with invisibility in a spiralling process. Unlike online discussion forums or bulletin boards, to a certain extent, the blog as an individually managed one-person-medium allows more active control of the interactivity by implementing one or more strategies to wall oneself off from undesirable conditions. This affects the (in)visibility of text as well as the blog itself. Whether by imposing invisibility on the self or the other, the coexistence of struggles for and struggles by visibility as expressed in *Moopeul yi akpeul* may become negotiated at the cost of losing one's voice or interaction.

Arendt (1958: 57) notes: 'Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life.' In order for the blogosphere to promise a democratic space, the ability and willingness to listen to opinions given from different positions are crucial, as is the need for a community

without closure through which mutual openness and respect are sustained (Couldry, 2000: 140). It is important not to exaggerate the potential of the emergence of a networked society without closure, sustained by technological mutual openness in the blogosphere. Yet, it would be inappropriate to underestimate the ways in which a community with closure can be virtually reproduced in the blogosphere where anonymity is not mutually empowering within a culture of collectivism. It is far from clear that a democratic technology alone provides the space for a rational public sphere, even though only a relatively small proportion of bloggers may engage in *akpeul* practices and discussion with like-minded others with little room for alternative voices. The blogosphere, or some part of it, is a terrain contested from within, reflecting socio-political discourses and cultural currents within which blog uses are embedded and are culturally appropriated.

This paper did not aim to examine the applicability of SoS theory with respect to the larger population of bloggers, and this study has not fully incorporated factors – such as the role of media in creating a broader climate of opinion – which are at the heart of SoS theory. Furthermore, with the technological freedom to surf the web, it is unclear whether the immediate environment plays a role as a more important measure of the climate of opinion to a greater extent than more remote sites, or individual differences in use of and gratification by blogging. However, this study does suggest that there is an intricate relation between environmental factors, whether immediate or remote, and the interactivity of opinion in the blogosphere and that this is not independent of larger socio-political discourses and cultural currents within which such blog uses are embedded and are culturally appropriated.

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