

# Internet newspapers as Alternative Media: The Case of OhmyNews in South Korea

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South Korean society was under military dictatorship from the 1970s to the 1980s. In those days, many journalists protested against the military authorities. Some of them went to jail and some lost their jobs by the actions of a dictatorial government. They launched a progressive daily newspaper, Hankyoreh. The funds for establishing Hankyoreh came from a fund-raising campaign by the people. Citizens supported Hankyoreh, because they strongly wished for such an alternative newspaper. Today, Hankyoreh is just one of many major daily newspapers in South Korea. South Koreans have lived through industrialization, dictatorship and democracy in a short period. We have learned that if we participate, we can change society for the better. The case of Hankyoreh is an example.

This is a story from the 1980s. South Korean society has been rapidly changing since 1990 and has become an information society. Hankyoreh represents alternative print media belonging to a society that has passed away. South Korean society today needs another alternative media, one suitable for the information society.

The communication environment is rapidly changing in South Korea. Internet users have sharply increased. South Korea is the most wired country in the world, with broadband connections in nearly 83 percent of households. According to a report issued September 2003 by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), South Korea leads the way in broadband penetration, with approximately 21 broadband subscribers for every 100 inhabitants. Hong Kong (China) ranks second in the world with nearly 15 broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants and Canada ranks third with just over 11 broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants. One reason for the sharp increase in broadband subscribers in South Korea is the growing demand for faster Internet speeds. Broadband services provide Internet connections that are at least five times faster than earlier dial-up technologies, enabling users to play online games and download music and videos, as well as share files and access information much faster and more efficiently than before.

This high-speed service means that Korean people use the Internet more, spending an average of 1,340 minutes online per month. Today, it is difficult to find an Internet user who hooks up using a modem in South Korea.

The emergence of the Internet provides people with a real opportunity to produce and deliver news at a reduced and affordable cost. For this reason, media power, which had been monopolized by capital and authority, is changing. The Internet newspaper is a fine example of how the Internet is changing the concept of media ownership.

## Internet newspapers in South Korea

There are two main types among Internet newspapers in South Korea. The first is affiliated to mainstream media as an electronic expansion of print media. Today, almost every mainstream print medium in South Korea has opened its own Internet newspaper. It launched the ?Korean On-line Newspaper Association? (KONA) in November 2000. A total of nine major affiliated Internet newspaper companies belong to KONA.

The other type is the independent Internet newspaper, which publishes only through the Internet. These independent Internet newspapers are alternative media as opposed to mainstream media. There are two organizations among the independent and alternative Internet newspapers. They are the 'Korean Internet Newspaper Association' (KINA) and 'Korean Internet Journalist Association' (KIJA). The first is an association of major independent Internet newspapers launched in October 2002 with nine major independent Internet newspapers.

KIJA, which was launched in September 2002, is an association of Internet journalists. At the moment, 400 Internet journalists from 50 independent Internet newspapers have become members of KIJA. The main objectives of KIJA are as follows. 1) To reform the media: Internet journalists will make an effort to reform the media by means of alternative Internet media. 2) To promote the social democratization and reunification of Korea: Internet journalists will serve social democratization and reunification as the successors of previous journalists who struggled against the dictatorship and conservative media authority in the past.

#### Establishment of OhmyNews

OhmyNews, which is a member of KINA, is the most popular Internet newspaper in South Korea. Mr. Oh Yeon-Ho, a journalist from a progressive magazine during the long years of dictatorship, sought to find a new way to reform media in South Korea. He launched OhmyNews ([www.ohmynews.com](http://www.ohmynews.com)) as a citizen-participatory alternative Internet newspaper on 22 February 2000. OhmyNews includes all kinds of news covering politics, society, culture, international affairs, education, the economy, IT, sports and entertainment, among others.

Its name, OhmyNews, is a play on the expression 'Oh my God!' which entered the Korean language by way of a comedian who popularized it around the time OhmyNews was founded in 2000. OhmyNews started with four full-time staff members and 700 'citizen reporters'. At the time of writing, there are more than 40 editors and reporters who publish about 200 stories a day. However, about 70% of the stories are written by more than 26,000 registered citizen reporters, who come from all walks of life, from housewives to professional writers.

The citizen reporters, so-called 'news-guerillas' (discussed below), are working with OhmyNews. The main objective of OhmyNews is media reform by citizens. Its slogan is 'Every citizen can be a reporter'. OhmyNews wants to become an alternative medium through the solidarity of news-guerillas, thus demonstrating people's media power.

The site attracts an estimated 2 million readers daily. Advertisers are supporting the Korean-language web site and the operation has been profitable since November 2002.

OhmyNews is one of the country's most powerful news services. In a survey carried out by the Korean news magazine, Sisa Journal, OhmyNews was identified as the only Internet media among the top 10 media organizations.

#### Table 1: Most Influential Media

1 KBS (TV)

2 Chosun-ilbo (Daily Newspaper)

3 MBC (TV)

4 Donga-ilbo (Daily Newspaper)

5 Joongang-ilbo (Daily Newspaper)

6 OhmyNews (Internet Newspaper)

7 Hankyoreh (Daily Newspaper)

8 SBS (TV)

9 YTN (Cable News Channel)

10 Kankuk-ilbo (Daily Newspaper)

Source: Weekly News Magazine Sisa-Journal, 2003

In addition, Internet portal sites such as ?Daum? (11th), ?Yahoo Korea? (14th) and ?Naver? (19th), and an Internet newspaper ?Pressian? (13th) are included in the top 20 media organizations.

?News guerillas? ? citizen reporters

A ?news guerilla? is a citizen reporter who dreams of being a Che Guevara ? the popular Latin American social activist who fought alongside Fidel Castro - in cyberspace. S/he wants to be a ?news producer?, not just a ?news consumer?. The Internet has changed the concept of news production and news consumption. In the past, citizens always remained ?news consumers?, but in the information age, they have the opportunity to be news producers.

OhmyNews is a unique experiment in ?citizen journalism? - anyone who registers with the site can become a reporter. It calls itself a ?news guerilla organization?. The ?news guerillas? do cover politics, economy, culture, arts and science but they tend to focus more on personally oriented issues like education, job conditions and the environment.

In a survey carried out by OhmyNews in September 2002, 74.8% were male ?news guerillas? while 25.2% were female. In terms of age, ?news guerillas? in their twenties made up 43.6%, thirties 33%, and forties 10.9%. The rest belong to other age groups. According to occupation, university students made up 22.4%, office workers 14.6%, and journalist 8.3%. There were smaller proportions in other categories (see table 2 below).

Table 2: Distribution of Occupations Among Citizen Reporters

Occupation %

Middle School Student 2.9

High School Student 4.3

University Student 22.4

Graduate Student 3.8

Office Worker 14.6

School Teacher 3.5

Lawyer 0.2

Journalist 8.3

IT related 3.5

Free-lancer 4.8

Housewife 1.3

The emergence of citizen reporters has broken down the monopoly of information control and ownership by political/economic elites and has significantly contributed to the democratization of the media. In fact, OhmyNews has changed the concept of the reporter. The old way meant becoming a professional journalist and getting a press card - a credentialed and somewhat elevated position in South Korean society. The new way, however, is that the reporter is the one who has the news and who is trying to inform others. Pay, however, is not an incentive. Pay for the 'news guerillas' varies from nothing to just under \$16, depending on how a story is ranked by the editors - 'basic,' 'bonus' or 'special.'

#### Credibility of news sources

OhmyNews has the opportunity and responsibility of delivering news stories that have been ignored by the mainstream media because it is an independent alternative Internet media. For it to survive and grow, ensuring the credibility of news stories is very important. This is particularly true for an Internet newspaper because of the many rumours and false news that circulate on the Internet. The ease with news stories can be circulated on the Internet also presents a challenge for ensuring credibility.

Articles submitted by citizen reporters are rigorously fact-checked by full-time staff; but only a handful are re-written or republished. About 70 percent of the roughly 200 items submitted by citizen reporters each day, after staff editors look at the stories. Citizen reporters are given free reign to post anything they like on the site. The only requirement is that they use their real identities. Copyright is shared between the site and the reporter, who is free to republish the material elsewhere.

## OhmyNews as alternative media

OhmyNews offers a public sphere in cyberspace for critical debates and discussions. Through citizen reporters and the comment system, people produce news, debate issues and discuss perspectives. Issues that cannot be covered in the mainstream print media can be taken up for discussion here. OhmyNews is certainly moving media power from the ruling class to the people, the citizens.

Internet newspapers are changing the whole political dynamic in South Korea. The emergence of the Internet newspaper has balanced the political debate between progressives and conservatives. More pertinent to the impact OhmyNews has had on the country's political culture were reports the service ran in 2002 after two schoolgirls were crushed to death by a US armoured vehicle on patrol. OhmyNews's reports of the incident were widely seen as forcing the hand of the mainstream media to pay attention to a story that conservative tradition in South Korea suggests they might have been inclined to ignore. Its reports on the deaths of two schoolgirls prompted one citizen reporter to call for demonstrations. The idea snowballed, and led to the biggest anti-American protests in the country's history.

Furthermore, the change is symbolized by the presidential election in December 2002. In the past, the conservative mainstream print media in South Korea could - and did - lead public opinion. They had the monopoly. They were against Roh Moo-hyun's candidacy. But OhmyNews supported the Roh Moo-hyun phenomenon, with all the 'netizens' participating.

As the elections were approaching, more and more people were getting their information and political analysis from spunky news services on the Internet instead of from the country's conservative mainstream media. At that time, OhmyNews registered as many as 20 million hits a day in a country of about 42 million people.

The results of the election polls showed that the victory of Roh Moo-hyun came from a huge surge of support from the Internet generation aged 20 to 30. In South Korea, where elections are usually decided by regional rather than generational loyalties, this was a dramatic change. It also shows a victory for the alternative media in South Korea. For this reason, after the election, Roh Moo-hyun granted OhmyNews the first interview he gave to any Korean news organization.

## Interactivity in OhmyNews

Digital media has the advantage of enabling two-way communication. Analogue media does not provide this opportunity; it is not two-way communication between the reader/the audience and the reporter. With the Internet newspaper, the traditional division between the reader and the reporter has disappeared. Citizens play both the role of news-consumer and news-producer at the same time.

To encourage interactivity, every news article in OhmyNews has a 'comment' function. Occasionally an article attracts hundreds, or even thousands, of comments from readers. Through the readers' comment feature, OhmyNews provides citizens with another opportunity to participate in news-making. So, if someone doesn't agree with a news story either in terms of facts or perspective, s/he can write a response, providing his/her own array of facts and present them from a different viewpoint.

What will counter mainstream media such as CNN, Time, or national dailies that are controlled

by the powerful? What can play the role of independent alternative media for people? Based on the experiences of OhmyNews and other Internet newspapers in South Korea, the Internet can be used to establish an alternative news network and to build solidarity among the people. As alternative media, Internet newspapers can give a voice to the voiceless people and counter the cultural imperialism of media multinational corporations.

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