Informatization in the Socio-Political Context of Korean Society

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1. The Issue of Informatization

The issue of informatization is no doubt currently mobilizing globalized attention. This attention seems to be by no means solely confined to the Western developed countries; no less amount of concerns are identifiable in many of developing countries as well. Indeed it has become a world-scale topic.

Behind the evolving notion of informatization lies the sheer conviction that speedy adoption of digitalized information infrastructure and establishing a linkage with globalized information networks will safely provide a strategic imperative for promoting the nation’s political democracy and socio-economic development. A variety of indicators suggest that developing countries are no exception to this globalized rush for the historical trend of “information revolution,” allocating a large portion of their financial resources to this end, regardless of their persistent lack of economic, industrial, financial and other social bases.

It is true, though, that the dream of developing countries to build up a modernized national information infrastructure as an essential technological basis for leap-frogging into affluent and democratic societies
is more often than not confronted by skeptical questioning of its own validity in reality. Critical assessment of the informatization of developing countries often displays in many instances not so much satisfactory consequences as compared with their original dream of leap-frogging. The installation of advanced information infrastructure in the context of developing nations, some critics argue, appears to bring about not so much political and social benefits as system maladjustment (Park, 1990).

The socio-political potential of information technologies is least likely to be automatically realized on a full scale in many developing areas of the world. If this is the case, what is called for is that a comprehensive and systematic evaluation of the conditions of applicability and possible consequences on the whole society must precede the actual installation of advanced information facilities. What is important is not the hasty and overly involvement in the adoption of information technologies but a systematic analysis of the conditions by which the potential benefit of informatization can be realized and/or impeded.

One of the most central issues related to the informatization project appears to consist in the topic of the public’s “universal access” to the information infrastructure. The issue of universal access and service centers around the policy concerns to extend the usage of information networks to the general public on a non-discriminatory and affordable basis (Mansell, 1993). The idea contains the hope to ensure electronic democracy by enabling the public’s equitable participation in the newly emerging information environment.

If we consider the agenda of universal access as a question of equitable participation of the general public in the nation’s informatization infrastructure, the traditional notion of “universal access,” originated from the experiences of Western societies, seems to contain some biases that are prone to restricting the scope of discussion about the informatization policies. More than anything else, the concept apparently carries the connotation of technological determinism in that top policy priority is
likely to be given to the provision of technological access per se. That means, the concept of universal access carries an implicit theoretical assumption that the key to the successful realization of information society lies in the adequate provision for the widest public with the “access” to information technologies.

The experiences of developing countries, however, give us the lesson that the technological accessibility alone cannot easily and automatically open the way to the realization of a democratic and participatory society. In other words, the problem of information society does not solely exist in the matter of technological provision. Rather the lessons learned from the experiences of non-Western societies call for the devotion of our policy attention to human, societal, and political factors of a given society.

This paper will suggest some lessons earned from the informatization processes of Korean society, which is still undergoing the process of development. It will focus on the question of how socio-political factors may have caused major hindrances to the actualization of technological potential of the advanced information infrastructure.

More specifically, this article will propose a critical assessment of the informatization of Korean society, which has been deeply involved in a variety of projects for the introduction of advanced national information infrastructure since the foundation of the Ministry of Telecommunication in 1994 (see National Computerization Agency, 1995). By doing so, we hope this paper can suggest some policy guidelines for many other developing countries eagerly pursuing the adoption of advanced information technologies. It is also hoped to propose some practical and theoretical questions concerning the issue of digitalized information infrastructure in the context of a non-Western society.
2. Disarticulation of Information Sectors

Amin (1982) and Evans (1979) mention that economic dependency tends to cause the “disarticulation” of the periphery’s structure of technology, social conditions, and the whole national economy. According to Amin (1982), the peripheral economy in the world-system is, as a result of distortion, composed of sectors and economic entities that are not effectively integrated into an “autocentric” whole, but merely juxtaposed. Each sector of the national economy is to exist as an atom, independent of the others, preventing the economic activity of one branch from generating a “leading effect” on others. Disarticulation frequently takes the form of severe sectoral disparities, characterized by a fundamental absence of basic industries and a predominance of non-productive branches.

Serious disarticulation can be easily documented in the realm of national information infrastructure of developing nations (Park, 1991). A certain sector of information infrastructure can be over-valued as compared with others, and the society is likely to over-allocate financial resources to that sector, at the expense of others, producing a structural gap within the development pattern of national information infrastructure.

This is more or less a widespread problem confronted by many developing countries. Sussman (1988, p.285) reports that the actual employment of information technologies in developing countries is “geared mainly for prestige, with little regard given to long-term or social benefit.”

This trend often leads to the disarticulation of information sectors in such a way that, despite the overall underdevelopment of the sectors of information infrastructure having a greater public nature, developing nations are dedicated to installing the most advanced, expensive and computerized high technologies and international satellite link-ups, with the consequences of overdevelopment of elitist, advanced, and
internationalized sectors as opposed to the retardation of less elitist, public, and grassroots sectors of information infrastructure (Park, 1990).

In this regard, the Korean way to the informatization also reveals a similar problem. As compared with the nation’s deep and ardent commitment to the project of advanced national information superhighway eagerly demonstrated by the allocation of tremendous amount of financial resources to this end (Ministry of Telecommunication, Korea, 1996a), far less than a parallel amount of policy attention has been directed to more public sectors of the nation’s information infrastructure. As an unavoidable consequence, even the metropolitan capital city Seoul has a very coarse and severely underdeveloped public library system in this age of Information Society, as compared with other capital cities of the countries showing comparable levels of socio-economic development (Seoul Development Institute, 1996).

This startling discrepancy between developmental levels of different information sectors gives rise to some important policy issues. Overemphasis placed on advanced and elitist information sectors at the expense of more basic, public and grassroots information sectors can result in the widening of an existing gap between the information rich and the poor. Some critics claim that greater policy emphasis should be given to the construction of the public library system in order to provide the general public with more basic and essential information services, instead of allocating a tremendous amount of financial resources to the highly advanced and internationalized informatization project (Seoul Development Institute, 1996).

Similar patterns of disarticulation can be found in many other dimensions of the nation’s overall information infrastructure. It is quite frequently identifiable in Korean society that a public organization’s adoption of a digitalized information network system tends to be utilized disproportionately more for bureaucratic and administrative purposes than for the its originally advocated public service functions. As an example of
this kind of disarticulation, it is very common in Korea that newly introduced computers at public schools and even universities are more or less exclusively monopolized by administrative staff members and not effectively utilized for the purpose of education and/or research.

The disarticulation of information sectors identifiable in the process of informatization in developing societies proposes a variety of theoretical and practical questions. To begin with, disarticulation problem can lead us to question the validity of the policy priority given to the advanced and digitalized information sector in the context of developing nations. It can be reminded that the substantial capital investment needed for the installation of sophisticated information networks requires the allocation of a large amount of financial resources for a developing nation, often resulting in the predicament of balance-of-payment shortage and augmenting foreign debt.

The second issue related to this disarticulation problem concerns about, as formerly suggested, its effect of gap-widening between the information rich and the poor. The access to the advanced, computerized, and internationalized information networks is very likely to be limited to the information rich. And the pursuit of informatization of developing countries emphasizing the elitist information sector is also likely to result in the overequipment of most advanced and elitist technology at the sacrifice of more basic and public sectors of information infrastructure, thereby deepening the existing information gap.

Third, because digitalized information networks are ready to be incorporated into global information infrastructure such as Internet, the primary function they can serve is to work as the conduit for the unidirectional information dependence of developing nations on highly developed countries (Schiller, 1996). This hypothesis can be easily confirmed by the tendency that, due to the underdevelopment of national information service systems, Internet users in a developing country are heading for international sources of information instead of national sources.
In sum, the problem of disarticulation raises the possibility that the top policy priority given to digitalized information superhighways by a developing country may not result in the fulfillment of the dream of socio-economic consequences in reality.

3. Networking from Above

The optimistic dream with regard to the coming age of informatization extends to the hope that digitalized information superhighway will provide a technological infrastructure for the promotion of participatory democracy. The hope usually stems from the expectation that advanced information technologies can make considerable contribution to empowering of the grassroots sectors and serve as a backbone of the democratic public sphere.

According to this view, digitalized information technologies can help facilitate more informed and interactive public debates by enabling the mobilization of people’s voices, especially those of the information poor. The era of information superhighway, this line of thinking envisages, will be characterized by more efficient public intervention in the political decision making processes.

However, the real world experience makes us very cautious about the suggestions raised by those who believe in this sort of technological determinism. One major hindrance to the full-scale realization of the technological potential for participatory democracy seems to lie in the traditional authoritarian political culture of Korean society. Critics like Yun (1996b) argues that, contrary to the Western societies, technological introduction of on-line information networks alone cannot lead to the realization of participatory electronic democracy in Korean society where the long-standing authoritarian political tradition has suffocated the culture of free and open political discussions.
A close look at the actual ways in which Korean people use computerized networks frequently reveals the lack of the culture of rational public debate (Yun, 1996a). People's actual pattern of telecommunication network usage is to a large extent limited to non-political and non-public purposes. Discussion forums for public concerns are the spaces least likely to mobilize the public's participation. And even the communication taking place in them usually is not very likely to produce lively submission and exchange of opinions and ideas (Han, 1996; Information Culture Center of Korea, 1995). This might suggest that the public space generated by information networks are not so much successful in mobilizing people's public voices. The social culture of silence and underdevelopment of the cultural basis of rational debate seems to suppress the technological possibility of participatory democracy.

Another factor responsible for this general failure in the mobilization of the public's voice through digitalized information networks seems to be the, most of all, government-initiated, centralized and authoritarian policy for informatization. The Korean way of informatization has been chiefly initiated and guided by the nation's central government (National Computerization Agency, 1995). The nation's informatization process has been in a certain sense imposed on the civil society by the government, resulting in "networking from above" (Yun, 1996a).

The strategy of networking from above taken by Korean central government has made the national information infrastructure less responsive to the information need of civil society. Information networks in recent Korea tend to lack carefully designed services to encourage the citizen's suggestion of opinions about public matters. Public policy information serviced by public offices is also very limited in terms of both quantity and quality. Even the publicized information by a public office tend to be framed more for propaganda than for genuine information service for the public. Under these circumstances, it would be a rational choice made by the majority of network users to remain as passive consumers of
entertainment than as active producers of political demands.

4. Communication Endogamy and Communication Closure

The original meaning of the term "communication" reminds us of the horizontal nature of human communication. The term, according to Cherry (1978), originates from the Latin word "communico," meaning "to share." From this perspective, insofar as we are in a genuine mode of communication, we never simply send or receive messages, but always hold them in common. Communication by definition denotes inter-communication, a two-way process of interaction and mutual understanding.

This conception of communication also describes the principle of liberal democracy. The modern concept of democracy rose from the notion of open and free marketplace of ideas, within which a variety of opinions is publicly voiced and freely contended, finally culminating in the formation of the true and rational public will (Mill, 1975; Milton, 1951; Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956). The essence of modern democracy abides in the vitality of free and open discussion between contending views. The facilitation of free and full inter-communication between different social groups enables them to be transformed into the "democratically organized public" (Dewey, 1927, 147).

Given that the original ideal of human communication lies in the horizontal exchange between multifarious and often competing social groups and meaning systems, genuine communication must occur across social boundaries and between multiple realities. This line of reasoning supports the idea that the sound basis of a society depends on the liveliness of "communication exogamy" as opposed to "communication endogamy." (Park, 1996). "Communication exogamy" refers to communication across
particular social boundaries of any kind, while “communication endogamy” refers to communication within them. The former is typically two-way and transactional, while the other implies a one-way and oppositional.

When these two concepts are applied to Korean society, the predominance of communication endogamy over exogamy becomes obvious. Phenomenological examination of Korean society suggests the existence of a multitude of isolated and closed circuits of communication at every level of society. And each of these closed circuits being a communicatively self-sufficient and independent; not very effective social communication flows across these mutually isolated closed circuits. Endogamous communication seems to be the main rule.

The dominance of communication endogamy implies the functional breakdown of communication channels between social units. The possibility of open, free, and interactive flow of communication between autonomous social unites tends to be severely damaged. As a devastating consequence of the “communication closure” (Park, 1994) brought about by communication endogamy, a desirable social function of communication to unite and network the parts into a purposefully cooperative whole is to be severely undermined.

Communication endogamy, as a logical consequence, does seem to undermine the technological potential of digitalized information infrastructure in Korea. Under these circumstances, the introduction of modern computerized communication network services cannot effectively facilitate open flow of communication between diverse social sectors and governmental units, thereby inhibiting the possibility of mutual cooperation between them based on the exchange and sharing of information.

As an example, the pattern of computer network participation in Korea shows a contrasting discrepancy between the case of associations based on shared interest and that of forums designed for public discussions. Korean network users show only a lowest level of participation in the latter as
opposed to their vitalized involvement in the former (Han, 1996; Information Culture Center of Korea, 1995). In many cases, the linkages between autonomous computerized information networks display severe underdevelopment (Ministry of Telecommunication, Korea, 1996b). In this situation, the expected open and free flow of information between organizations and groups with the aid of computer networks tends to be cut off by their selfish sectionalism and other habitualized closure-oriented practices.

This tendency apparently suggests that the functions of modern computerized information superhighway are shaped and determined not solely by its inherent characteristics; but only in conjunction with the pre-existing structure of social communication. Thus, in order to achieve a full-scale actualization of information superhighway's technological potential, the general plan for national informatization should pay enough attention to non-technological factors at the same time.

5. Conclusion

Our critical discussion about the consequences of Korean way of informatization suggest that the dream of information society cannot be realized by technological possibilities alone. Besides the technological side, the experiences recommend us to consider social, political, and other factors at the same time. The discussion gives us an obvious lesson that for the full-scale actualization of the technological potential imbedded in information highways, we should perhaps consider some socio-political factors more seriously. Frequently this non-technological factors are working as serious barriers hindering the free, open and multidirectional access to information in many developing nations.

Non-technological barriers can take a variety of forms within a society. For example, the information sectors of a country can reveal serious
disarticulation with each other. In this case, the advanced information sector cannot be easily “networked” with more basic and public ones, thereby undermining the sound basis for the universal access to the information highways for information have-nots.

In this regard, our discussion brings the connotation that information highways are not sufficient for the public unless supported and networked with “information local roads” or even “unpaved trails.” In addition, special attention must be given to pre-existing social communication structure of a society. When communication endogamy prevails a society diverse social sectors, interests, voices, and visions cannot be properly networked and mediated. Political factors can add much variation to the shaping and usage of information superhighway.

The recognition of the central influence played by non-technological factors leads us to another lesson that the pursuit of informatization should be dynamically fused with a more general plan to reform undemocratic socio-political situation of a given society. The project of informatization should go hand in hand with a prospectus to reform a society’s the overall authoritarian communication structure in order for the project of information superhighway to be more amenable to human needs and social necessities.

Finally, if we can agree that simple provision of technological accessibility to information superhighway cannot effectively ensure proper utilization, I think we should direct our theoretical and practical attention to the question of effective networking. The issue of information superhighway poses the important question of how we can establish a ground for free, open, interactive and democratic networking of diverse social sectors.
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