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Online news diffusion dynamics and public opinion formation: A case study of the controversy over judges' personal opinion expression on SNS in Korea



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ABSTRACT

On the Internet, the line between news and opinion becomes blurred in terms of content and form. In this sense, the processes of news diffusion on the Internet and online public opinion formation are integrated. This study selects one Korean example about the private tweet of a judge about government social network service (SNS) regulation and analyzes citation networks from one news/opinion to another news/opinion. By relying on social network analysis (SNA) methods, this study examines how news/opinions diffuse and how they interact and influence each other's ideological frame within agencies sharing the same ideology and between agencies whose ideologies contrast. The results show that public discourse on the Internet is clearly polarized and fragmented along political ideological lines. Additionally, the findings show that the winner is the conservative bloc because it succeeds in achieving within-bloc solidarity and ensures the resonance of news frames with the cultural values of Korean society. Implications for these findings in modern democracy are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the era of mass communication, media organizations are news providers, and citizens are news consumers. Under this dichotomy, the line between the news provided by media organizations and the opinion of the audiences of media organizations is clearly drawn. As assumed in traditional news diffusion studies (DeFleur, 1987), news is frequently treated as immutable information and can influence citizens' opinions, which are usually defined as valence evaluations of a targeted object in public opinion literature (Converse, 1987). Under this paradigm, it is not unreasonable to treat "media discourse and public opinion

... as two parallel systems" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 1), which are separately analyzed but jointly interpreted.

The wall between media organizations as news providers and citizens as consumers, however, has begun to collapse since the advent of the Internet (Jenkins, 2006). On the Internet, the line between news and opinion becomes blurred in terms of content and form, and online messages that are considered both news and opinion simultaneously are conceptualized as news/opinion. In this sense, the news diffusion process and public opinion process become indistinguishable, indicating that two or more competing news/opinions about an issue discursively interact in the public sphere (Chong & Druckman, 2007). While public opinion processes were conceptually integrated with news diffusion prior to the birth of the Internet (Blumer, 1948; Price, 1992), it has become possible for modern scholars to obtain near-perfect records of the diffusion process of

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news/opinions on the Internet due to modern computer science technologies that will be introduced later in this study. Specifically, modern scholars can trace how a controversial public issue initially emerges on the Internet, how players such as media organizations and government institutions as well as the public interact around the issue over time, and how a frame comprising the issue competes with other frames while diffusing and ultimately becomes a dominant frame in a society.

This research selects one recent Korean example in which the private tweet of a judge about the governmental attempt to regulate messages on social network services (SNSs) becomes a controversial social issue, showing how mass media, state elites, and civic advocacies interact around the issue, as well as the frames of news/opinions that compete to capture the online public discourse. Methodologically, this study content analyzes the ideological frame of media organizations' news and Internet users' opinions and conducts computerized text analysis to determine the citation patterns from one news/opinion to another news/opinion. This study relies on social network analysis (SNA)¹ methods to examine how news/opinions diffuse and how they interact and influence each other's ideological frame within agencies sharing the same ideology and between agencies whose ideologies contrast.

1.1. Reformulation of news diffusion processes on the Internet

Conventional studies on news diffusion are of limited use, both theoretically and methodologically, for explaining the active participation of users in online news/opinion diffusion. Conventional literature on news diffusion defines the concept by assuming a flow of information "from mass media to mass audience" (Price, 1992, p. 107). Such conceptualizing efforts include massive opinion surveys that ask respondents about their awareness of news, particularly highly visible news events, such as the assassination of President Kennedy (Greenberg, 1964) or the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster (Ibrahim, Ye, & Hoffner, 2008).

Survey design favored in conventional research, however, is less apt to explain news/opinion diffusion on the Internet. First, it has been repeatedly pointed out that the memories of survey respondents regarding their own past behaviors, including media use or political behaviors such as voting, are frequently flawed (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010). This methodological drawback of survey data becomes more serious when examining how issue frames, defined as interpretative packages of controversial news events (Entman, 1993, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), compete and transform during the diffusion process (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Im, Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2011). Second, there are specific citizen segments who pay particular attention to a certain type of public issue who

are known as the attentive public (Converse, 1987; Price, 1992), indicating that any population in its entirety does not pay attention to every issue emerging in the public sphere. Thus, previous studies on news diffusion have been inclined to limit the scope of research to the investigation of news events that are exceptionally visible to the near-entire population. On the Internet, all public activities of users are recorded and data-mined (Liu, 2007), which enables researchers to objectively map the diffusion process of online news/opinion, even in cases of news events that are known only to the attentive public.

In summary, research on the online news/opinion diffusion process should be approached using a different theoretical diffusion model. Therefore, this study aims to suggest how the public opinion process model, which describes how an attentive public forms its opinion around a public issue, can be conceptualized as a theoretical remedy explaining the news/opinion diffusion process on the Internet.

1.2. Opinion competition in public opinion processes

Price (1992) defines public opinion processes as "communication processes through which publics are constituted and within which opinions on public affairs are formed" (p. 74). Relying on the concept of the public opinion process, Im et al. (2011) uses an organism's life in the biosphere as an analogy of the issue cycle in the arena of public discourse. While most survey-based opinion studies focus on the charged reactions of people to certain news events, the process approach to public opinion emphasizes how an issue is born in public debate, how competing opinions develop, and how the issue declines in the public sphere. In this sense, opinion refers to the interpretation of a news event, as does the term news frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Essentially, public opinion is born via debate or discussion and declines with the public's silence. As emphasized in public opinion literature (Blumer, 1948; Davison, 1958; Price, 1992), individual citizens become the public by endorsing or rejecting certain positions on an issue. When citizens tie themselves to opinions on an issue, thoughts and facts intermix, and the issue becomes modified, negotiated, or extremified due to both interactions within the same side (within-side) and between different sides (between-sides). For instance, public opinion scholars have found that American citizens' positions on the abortion issue were originally not as clear-cut as the current pro-choice versus pro-life debate but were uncertain or ambivalent (Zaller, 1992). However, repeated discursive within-side or between-sides interactions have driven the American public to greater extremes, and opinions have been polarized. In short, discursive interactions such as debate or ongoing discussion tend to sort citizens into meso-level publics, which are either united or opposed according to the line between similar and dissimilar opinions in the public sphere. Thus, how publics compete in a society is represented by the competition of discourse in the public opinion process. In this sense, analyzing which opinion side of an issue becomes dominant reveals which

¹ In this study, social network analysis refers to a statistical approach that will be introduced with ordinary terms in Section 3. Social network analysis in this study does not exclusively refer to analysis of specific social networks formed by social actors or organizations in social settings, as attempted in prior studies, such as Cnaan, Kang, Kim, and Lee (2014).

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