



The emerging viewertariat in South Korea: The Seoul mayoral TV debate on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) represent Web 2.0 platforms or networking tools through which users can freely exchange ideas, opinions, experiences, and viewpoints and thus have considerable influence on the formation of political discourse. Despite the wide diffusion of SNSs and their increasing political influence, traditional media such as TV have retained their influence to a certain extent because new media and traditional media are not independent of each other. In particular, recent technological advances have made it possible for individuals to exchange their opinions through SNSs on a real-time basis while watching TV. As a result, the formation of political discourse may shift from the traditional mass media to social media, and viewer responses generated through social media may be transferred quickly to the mass media. Given this important trend, this study provides an empirical analysis of the pattern of interactions between TV and SNSs in the Korean context. More specifically, the study investigates the features and patterns of online messages from SNS users in Korea about TV debates during the Seoul mayoral by-election in 2011. By assuming some differences in features of political discourse across various types of SNSs, the study compares those features specifically associated with TV debates by considering Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. The results suggest that SNS users not only accept and interpret political discourse while watching TV but also participate actively in its production and restructuring. In addition, the results indicate some differences in communication patterns between the three SNS platforms.

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One of the most important changes in journalism in recent years has been the worldwide diffusion and popularization of social networking sites (SNSs). SNSs represent open-media platforms or networking tools that allow users to freely exchange ideas, opinions, experiences, and viewpoints and thus have considerable influence on the formation of political communication and discourse. According to typical explanations of the formation of political discourse through the mass media, various media can highlight the importance of specific issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Previous studies have suggested that elite segments of society tend to be the main definers of important social events and thus that they define the significance of such events in a passive manner (Hall, 1982). However, the emergence of SNSs, which can form hubs that expand interactive

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communication while sharing and amplifying citizens' political interests, requires a new approach to understanding the formation of political discourse through the mass media.

With the rise of diverse forms of media that connect individuals to one another, media have been understood not only as channels for distributing messages but also as a space in which individuals can self-organize their opinions on specific issues (Shirky, 2008). Castells (2009) explained the changes in power relationships caused by recent developments in the media environment by suggesting the concept of mass self-communication and emphasizing networking power, which refers to an individual's power over who or what is included in a network. Here mass self-communication refers to the use of new media for private and/or public messages that can reach the masses. In particular, recent technological advances have made it possible for individuals to exchange their opinions through SNSs on a real-time basis while watching TV. As a result, the formation of political discourse may shift from the traditional mass media to social media, and viewer responses generated through social media may be transferred quickly to the mass media. Given this important trend, this study empirically analyzes the pattern of interactions between TV and SNSs in the Korean context. More specifically, the study investigates the features and patterns of online messages from SNS users in Korea about TV debates during the Seoul mayoral by-election in 2011. By assuming some differences in features of political discourse across various types of SNSs, the study compares those features specifically associated with TV debates by considering Twitter, Facebook, and blogs.

1. A literature review

1.1. Emergence of the *viewertariat*

Television is a centralized medium for top-down editorial control, whereas SNSs can facilitate horizontal connections between users. In addition, SNSs can provide TV viewers with many opportunities to communicate with one another on a real-time basis while watching TV. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project (Smith and Boyles, 2012), 52% of adult users of mobile phones in the U.S. used their phones while watching TV. In particular, 29% made recent use of their phones to exchange text messages with other users who were watching the same TV programs but were in different locations. This trend suggests the emergence of a new group of viewers who maintain their individual identity and behave individually in ordinary times but behave collectively when specific issues of common interest arise (Hardt and Negri, 2004).

This study considers the *viewertariat*, an interesting concept referring to the increasing trend toward digitally mediated social networking and the sharing of TV content. According to Anstead and O'Loughlin's (2009) definition, this concept suggests a change in the passive role of TV viewers from a traditional perspective. The word "*viewertariat*" combines the words "viewer" and "proletariat" to indicate individuals' exchange of opinions through SNSs while watching TV programs reflecting some political discourse. Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2009 coined this term in a study for *Question Time*, a popular TV program by BBC (this study was aired on October 22, 2009). They proposed this concept to refer to those viewers who exchanged opinions and debated through Twitter while watching Nick Griffin, the leader of the ultraright British National Party, on TV. Wohn and Na (2011) analyzed Tweets of those Twitter users who were posting those Tweets while watching President Barack Obama's live speech at the White House announcing his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize on October 9, 2009. Ampofo et al. (2011) recently applied this concept to a TV debate during the British general election in 2010 and produced similar findings.

This general election (the most recent one in the U.K.) illustrates how TV and SNSs can complement each other and coevolve (Ampofo et al., 2011; Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011; Chadwick, 2011a,b). The U.K. has relatively advanced party politics, and therefore TV debates have not been a widely accepted part of elections because such debates have generally been viewed as tools for building popularity, not as platforms for discussing important policies. However, in 2010, the ruling and opposition party candidates agreed to hold the first TV debate during the general election, receiving considerable attention from the mass media and the public. In addition, SNSs had considerable influence on this general election. For example, the British Conservative Party posted Tweets about their campaign donations on MyConservatives.com to help SNS users to make convenient donations through Paypal. The Labor Party filled the first page of Labor Doorstep with supporters' comments collected from Twitter and Facebook.

In addition, the Liberal Democratic Party, led by Nick Clegg, who caused a sensation in the 2010 general election and was given the nickname "Nick Obama," lampooned rival parties through Labservative.com. The Liberal Democratic Party had the most visible online presence and had the largest number of Twitter followers (Twitter.com/nick_clegg) (CNN, 4 May, 2010; *The Guardian*, 11 April, 2010). The key aspect of this election was the introduction of diverse services combining TV and SNSs. ITV showed viewers' Tweets on their on-air page on a real-time basis by using the services of CoveritLive, a Canadian firm. Tweetminster (<http://tweetminster.co.uk>), a political website, introduced crude Tweets by viewers of the TV debate on a real-time basis by using the "sentiment tracker," which analyzes the content of Tweets. In addition, BBC, Sky, and ITV transferred real-time responses from small audience panels through a real-time worm chart (Chadwick, 2011a). That is, during this election, the formation of political discourse shifted from the mass media to social media, and viewer responses generated through social media were then quickly transferred to the mass media. Based on this election, Chadwick (2011a) reported that the news cycle, which has traditionally been produced and distributed by an elite group of journalists, political parties, and power bloggers, is being replaced with the so-called "political information cycle," which is formed collectively by individuals' actions and instant responses through the fusion of traditional media and SNSs.

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