In South Korea, social media is playing an important role not previously fulfilled by conventional media, because of its advantages like user initiative, interactivity and low cost. More than anything else, social media is providing valuable communication channels, especially for nonviolent activists. Whenever there are rallies, protests or events not considered 'newsworthy' by the established mainstream media, 'wall posters' are spread via web bulletins and social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook. In 2008, when millions of people participated in a series of anti-government candlelight protests, people were organised en masse, through hobby websites. There was also a case where user-created video letters - adapted from prison writings by those who protested against the Jeju Island Naval Base construction - were circulated among supporters via YouTube.

Every citizen is a reporter

'Internet press', run by the active participation of the public, is a distinctive phenomenon originating in South Korea. 'OhmyNews' is a news website with the motto 'Every Citizen is a Reporter.' Anyone can write news articles as a reporter, and readers can support writers of their choice, by paying them a manuscript fee. Many social movement organisations are using this type of media to distribute news for their events and activities. In this way, through social media, people can access unfiltered reports on issues that are not covered by television programs and newspapers due to possible external pressure or censorship. Arguments and debates occurring on web portals, news websites, blogs and via social media contribute to the formation of critical public opinion as well.

The use of social media is not only a means by which information is shared and opinions are exchanged, but it is also a movement itself. Those who cannot afford to take to the streets can participate in a simultaneous Twitter action. In 2013, on the 10th anniversary of the USA's invasion of Iraq, people took photos of themselves holding their messages and uploaded them on social media. Similarly, during the struggle against the building of electric transmission towers in Miryang, there was a 'Day of Action' when everyone could participate in the struggle on different levels by attending a rally, making phone calls in protest, signing a petition, and sharing news via social media. In situations where urgent petitions for arrested prisoners of conscience are needed, quick circulation through social media is a massive help. Even in the midst of a direct action, participants use smart phones and mobile instant messengers such as KakaoTalk to share situations in real time, make rapid decisions and pass on modifications to the course of action.

International communication

At times, international solidarity and communication are made through social media. For example, in 2013, it was discovered that the government of Bahrain was using a massive amount of tear gas imported from South Korea to repress peaceful protests. Urgent actions were organised by peace groups in South Korea, and they managed to stop additional exports. This news was relayed to activists in Bahrain and encouraged their movements. Also, during the 2013 Seoul International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition (ADEX), activists used the exact same slogans used by those who took action against the Defense Security and Equipment International (DSEi) held earlier in the same year in the UK. It was a tactic adopted deliberately to show arms dealers that 'we are everywhere', and to build international links. After seeing the photos and video clips of our actions, activists in the UK commented on how much they enjoyed watching them. These are good examples of how social media provided positive stimulation and encouragement to those working for the same cause in different places.

The drawbacks...

Of course, the use of social media has certain drawbacks. The credibility of information spreading through social media can be a concern, as are privacy issues and problems regarding security and surveillance. In one case, as knowledge began to surface of the police's making use of photos on social media to investigate participants at rallies, an organiser asked users to delete the photos they had uploaded. Social media is also not completely free from state censorship and oppression of the freedom to expression. In South Korea, individuals are still being imprisoned under the National Security Act simply for writing a blog regarding North Korea, or an opinion against government policy. While it has been abolished after being ruled unconstitutional, the crime of spreading false information was applied indiscriminately in the past. There are also a number of cases where internet service providers have deleted users' posts unilaterally, under the orders of authorities.

Recently, we have also become aware of the counter-actions against social movements using social media. It has become common for internet users supporting far-right websites to use social media to glorify past military dictatorships, and to express extreme hatred based on gender, race, ethnicity or political beliefs. State institution's are also making use of social media to influence public opinion. It was recently disclosed that in the runup to the presidential election in 2013, the National Intelligence Service (South Korea's top intelligence agency), and Cyber Command (a special unit of the Ministry of National Defense) had been engaged in psychological warfare against South Korea's own citizens. The NIS and Cyber Command agents are suspected of spreading over twenty million SNS posts defaming the candidate of opposition party.

As we can see in the case of South Korea, social media can be a useful tool for nonviolent social movements. We should keep in mind, however, that it is of equal use to our opponents! In this regard, nonviolent activists must study and develop more strategies and tactics for "social defense" on social media.

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