A-List Twitter Users in Korea's Political Tweet Sphere

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ABSTRACT

This study examines A-list users in the Twitter network of National Assembly members in South Korea. An examination of some socio-geographic characteristics of these A-list users indicates that the distribution of these users in terms of their geographic location and social status can be understood in the context of the Korean social structure. In addition, an examination of Tweets posted by these users shows that half of these users had negative attitudes toward the current administration and that some Tweets contained emotional terms.

Keywords: *Twitter, Politician, A-list User, National Assembly*

1. INTRODUCTION

Twitter (www.twitter.com), launched in 2006, now has more than 175 million users worldwide. The exponential growth in the number of registered users has attracted considerable attention from around the world. The unique design of Twitter allows information to be circulated to broader audiences in a cost-effective manner. For example, the outcome of the 2009 Iranian election was widely reported in a real-time manner by Twitter users both inside and outside the country. It can be assumed that, without Twitter, the international community would not be provided with information on critical events in the country. Some studies have shown that Twitter can be used to spread information during a crisis on a real-time basis [1]-[3]

Twitter is now considered to be a useful tool to mobilise supporters and reach broader audiences in social, political, and other activist movements. The number of civic organisations using Twitter has increased sharply, resulting in a broad discussion about Twitter's impact on society among scholars from a wide range of academic fields. Further,

considerable attention has been paid to the relationship between domestic politics and Twitter, particularly after U.S. President Obama used the medium during the 2008 presidential election. In this regard, previous studies have examined the political use of Twitter in a number of countries, including the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia, and some EU member countries.

In South Korea (hereafter "Korea"), an increasing number of politicians (particularly National Assembly members) have been using Twitter to communicate with fellow politicians and citizens, share their views on government policies and regulations, and inform their followers of their political activities. The present study focuses on those citizens who are active users in the Twitter network of National Assembly members and examines the characteristics of those users. The results have important implications in that, in a democratic society, politicians should listen to and carefully consider the opinion of the general public. In Korea, National Assembly members should better understand how citizens respond to various social, economic, and political issues, particularly when they seek re-election.

2. RELATED STUDIES

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In recent years, a number of studies (e.g.,[4]) have examined Twitter's power to disseminate information. Twitter can be accessed through various devices (e.g., the Twitter website and smart phones), and messages with multimedia content can be posted. Twitter has been demonstrated to be a major communication channel by cases in which news first broke through Twitter, not through the traditional mass media [1], [5]. With Twitter, citizens can easily become amateur journalists, reporting on and discussing various issues and events that draw their attention.

Previous studies have examined Twitter use by policymakers and citizens. For example, policymakers in the U.K., the U.S., and Canada have made active use of Twitter and other social media to facilitate communication with citizens [6]. The Hansard Society examined Twitter use in U.K. politics and found that Twitter is more popular on the left of the political spectrum and is related to social media strategies of parties [7]. Researchers have contradictory findings of Twitter's impact on citizen participation in politics. Reference [8] suggested that citizens have been increasingly driven away from the political center, but others have argued that social media (e.g., Twitter) have the potential to close the gap between politicians and citizens [9]-[10]. Although some people have remained sceptical about what truly motivates politicians to use Twitter [11], Twitter is expected to play an important role as a bridge between politicians and citizens. Twitter can help politicians bypass traditional intermediaries and create "a more direct form of political communication and e-democracy" [12]. The case of Kerry McCarthy, a Member of Parliament (MP) in the U.K., provides support for the argument that Twitter has the capacity to be "a sort of insider for [their] constituents into the political processes" [9].

Twitter can also be used to criticize politicians and political conditions. In as much as online criticism could go viral, not all politicians are willing to make full use of Twitter (as well as other new media), although they realise its communication power. Public sentiments can be understood by examining Tweets posted by citizens. The extent to which a particular government policy is supported can also be measured based on Tweets. Reference [9] examined 3,461 Tweets by six British MPs and found few inappropriate comments directed at the Parliament. WeGov, a research project funded by the EU, aims to develop a toolkit for "policymakers to interact with and understand the opinions of citizens by using well-established public [social media such as Twitter]" [13]

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This study investigates A-list Twitter users (citizens), defined in this study as users with the highest number of links with 22 National Assembly members in 2009. Currently, the National Assembly consists of nearly 300 members. The main reason for us to study the 22 members was based on the fact that they were the first group of the Assembly members that started to utilise Twitter as a tool to communicate with citizens. In other words, they are early adopters of Twitter. Their behaviour is likely to influence the rest of the

Assembly members in deciding whether to use Twitter of not. Thus, we consider it is important to study their relations with the citizens on Twitter. This study is guided by the following research questions: Who are A-list users? What are their characteristics (e.g., social, financial, and educational backgrounds)? What do they tweet about? What are their attitudes toward the current administration? To address these questions, a computer program was designed to download public profiles (i.e., following and follower lists) of the selected National Assembly members and identified A-list users from the following and follower networks of the members. In order to know the socio-demographic status of A-list users, we visited the users' Twitter profiles and manually read their Tweets. When information provided by Twitter on the users (e.g., their geographic location, educational background, and occupation) was unclear or insufficient, we visited the users' other online spaces (e.g., blogs and personal websites) for more information.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Identification of A-list users

Because of the country's high broadband penetration, population distribution, and government policies and strategies [14], Koreans have been deeply involved in online activities. Previous research has shown that internet users in Korea prefer activities involving blogs and mobile-enabled minihompies (85.5%), online groups and communities (77.8%), and online shopping (71.3%) to those involving games and music [15]. According to the 2007 technographic survey, 35% of internet users in Korea visited social networking sites (topping those in the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, and Japan). In the Asia-Pacific region, Korea has an extremely active blogging population: approximately 38% of its internet users are "*Creators,*" those users who "at least once a month publish a blog or article online, maintain a webpage, or upload video or audio files to sites like YouTube" [16]. Online groups or communities established around a topic of common interest are popular in Korea, and through the technical design of Twitter, it is likely that like-minded Twitter users would gradually form online communities. Similarly, [17] proposed that a sense of community can be formed through Twitter use. To a certain extent, the network of incumbent National Assembly members is a type of community, and those with the highest number of links with these members can be regarded as central users who can effectively mediate links between National Assembly members. In addition, they can help deliver messages more efficiently. Thus, by identifying A-list users, defined in this study as those citizens with the highest number of links with National Assembly members, we can achieve a better understanding of specific online Twitter "communities" and perform a preliminary analysis of their socio-demographic characteristics.

The results indicate that some Twitter users attracted more attention from (or were more familiar to) politicians than others and that some followed more politicians than others.

For example, one user was followed by 13 politicians, and another user was followed by 11 politicians. In addition, 20 politicians were followed by one user, and 19, by four users. This raises the question of whether any general Twitter users have mutual ties with those politicians to whom they are linked.

The results indicate that 5,330 general users had at least one link with the National Assembly members in the following network of these politicians and that 5,227 had the same in the follower network. A majority of these users were based in Korea and used Korean for communication. Those users who followed more politicians were typically more politically active. To detect A-list blogs, the target analysis used a procedure similar to that used by [18]. From the politicians' follower network of 5,527 users, we selected the top 234 users (4.23%), (234 users) of the 5,527 users to examine their ties to the National Assembly members. The "top users" are those users who followed or were followed by the greatest number of Assembly members. Similarly, we selected the top 210 users (3.95%) from the politicians' following network of 5,330 users. These 210 users followed by at least eight National Assembly members. Accordingly, a total of 444 users were selected. Of these, 143 had mutual relationships with the National Assembly members, and 158 had a link to or from these members.

Table 1. Numbers of followings and followers between National Assembly members and public users

	Following network	Follower network
Unidirectional ties	67	91
Mutual ties	143	
Total	301	

We examined the "public" network formed by these 301 users. The public network consisted of 1,330 links, and its density was 0.015, meaning that approximately 1.5% of all possible links were present. The network was highly centralised in terms of both inlinks (91.5%) and outlinks (93.5%). The top three actors in the inlink network included Sang Jung Sim (278 actors), Hoi Chan No (246 actors), and Woo Tack Jung (115 actors). Sim and No were members of the 17th National Assembly, and Jung served the 15th and 16th terms. They also sent the highest number of links to other network members: Sim sent links to 284 actors; No, to 279 actors; and Jung, to 134 actors.

There may be three reasons why the presence of these three former National Assembly members in the Twitter network was strong. First, both Sim and No were co-presidents of the New Progressive Party, a left-wing party that was progressive and lacked financial resources. This finding is consistent with the argument that internet technologies are useful for disadvantaged groups in their efforts to promote themselves and attract more attention. Second, they might have cultivated a strong base of supporters during their terms as National Assembly members. Third, they might have continued their relationships with active National Assembly members to maintain their political networks or influence. In

addition, they might have been seeking reelection, and thus, being closely connected to their supporters and party members could have been beneficial.

4.2 Characteristics of A-list Twitter users

We examined the characteristics of the 301 Twitter users, who had connections with the 22 National Assembly members. As expected, a majority (75%) were male. This finding is consistent with the general perception that males use the Internet more and are more interested in politics than females. Only 26% provided their email addresses online. This may be due to privacy or security concerns. However, those who did provide their addresses might have been more willing to take responsibility for their online activities, and thus, their statements against or for particular politicians might have been more meaningful.

We were able to identify the age of some users (20%). Those aged 40 to 49 formed the biggest group, followed by those aged 30 to 39 (4.98%) and those aged 50 to 59 (3.99%). Younger individuals aged 29 and under formed the smallest group. This result is consistent with the findings of [19], who wrote in the New York Times that teenagers are "in the minority. It's the 45 to 54's who are the largest group," and provides support, who argued that younger individuals prefer more private communication methods (e.g., they can have more privacy by using a mobile phone to send a text message, which is more private than a Tweet).

The distribution of users in terms of their geographic location and level of education can be understood in the context of Korea's social structure. In a highly internet-penetrated society such as Korea, a majority of internet users are still those who have a college degree and good income because they can afford the relatively high cost of computer equipment and internet fees. It is difficult to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of Twitter users unless their profiles and messages are examined. This approach can be found in previous blog research ([20]-[25]), and such an approach has been applied to the analysis of thematic content in online settings ([17], [26],[27]). The types of occupations of the users became apparent through the examination of publicly accessible information on Twitter. We first visited the A-list users' Twitter pages and read their biographical information. For those users without information on their occupation, we visited their personal web space (e.g., cyworld pages, minihompies, personal blogs, etc) if it was available. These A-list users represented a wide spectrum of society: publishers (15%), professionals (14%), company employees (9%), political party members (6%), undergraduate students (5%), and businessmen (4%). We also examined the information provided by the users on their Twitter pages and visited their personal websites/pages when necessary to determine their physical location. Most of the users were located in Korea. A few were in the U.S., the U.K., Singapore, Japan, and Vietnam. In Korea, most lived in Seoul (79.47%), followed by those in Busan (3.16%). The busy and more isolated lifestyle of people in Seoul (the capital) may stimulate the use of the Internet for general purposes. In addition, Seoul is the political center of Korea, and its

residents have more opportunities to encounter political events and are more likely to discuss political issues online. To a certain extent, these results provide support for the argument that new media may reinforce the existing offline inequality in political participation in the online environment [6], [28]

The user attitude toward the current administration was examined by analyzing the 301 users' Tweets. Approximately 50% (158 users) had negative attitudes toward the current administration in terms of its socioeconomic policies and ideological stance, among others; 37.21% (112) were neutral; 2.33% (7) supported the government; and attitudes of 7.97% (24) could not be determined. Their Tweets covered various topics, including politics, social welfare, religion, corruption, freedom of speech, and news. For example, some users, including a university professor, disapproved of existing education policies. A number of Tweets criticized the current administration and were in support of the Democratic Party and late President Roh Moo-hyun. Some Tweets contained emotional terms such as "dictator Myung-bak."

We also found a Twitter account used by the presidential office to introduce the President's activities and respond to criticisms. In addition, citizen journalists working for *OhMyNews,* an influential online newspaper, were active on Twitter, implying that Twitter is a useful platform for journalists in their efforts to discover some interesting or important issues unknown outside the Twitter space.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined A-list users, defined in this study as those users with the highest number of links with politicians. We collected the data by using a computer program designed for retrieving public data from Twitter.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous studies and general opinions of the public. The A-list users tended to be males between 40 and 49, and a majority lived in Seoul (the capital of Korea), where citizens typically have more opportunities to access political information and get involved in political discussions both online and offline. Moreover, these users showed more negative attitudes toward the current administration in terms of its social, economic, and foreign policies, among others.

Although it is still too early to draw a firm conclusion on whether Twitter use can lead to changes in formal political institutions, it is clear that Twitter and other social media have provided citizens with new ways to interact more directly with politicians and policymakers; spread information more quickly and reach more audiences; and discuss important issues with other interested users.

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