Introduction to the 2021 Winter Special Issue: Communicating Risk in Networked East Asia

K. Hazel Kwon[1], Sejung Park[2], YoungJu Shin[3]

This article discusses the importance of investigating risk and crisis communication in the context of Asian digital societies. It introduces the remaining articles in this special issue.

Keywords: crisis communication, risk communication, networked Asia

1. Risk and Crisis Communication in Networked East Asia

At the moment of this writing, the entire world is still fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Not just the pandemic, somewhere on earth must be dealing with a crisis right this minute: Natural disasters, public health crisis, humanitarian crisis, interstate conflicts, terrorism, and violence to name a few. These are examples of risks and crises that societies battle ceaselessly around the world.

Risk and crisis communication are communicating about uncertainty (Cleaveland et al., 2020). In a network society, digital media and social technologies have become integral to reduce – and, unfortunately, sometimes amplify –uncertainties in public minds. A decade-long scholarship on digital media-based crisis informatics (Palen & Anderson, 2016) has attested that crisis/risk management in a network society is essentially a socio-technical problem. The ways in

1 Dr. K. Hazel Kwon is Associate Professor of Digital Audiences at Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Arizona State University, khkwon@asu.edu, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7414-6959.
2 Dr. Sejung Park is Assistant Professor of the Division of Global and Interdisciplinary Studies at Pukyong National University in South Korea, sjpark@pknu.ac.kr, ORCiD: 0000-0001-9087-4075.
3 Dr. YoungJu Shin is Associate Professor at Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Youngju.Shin@asu.edu, ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6751-8064.

which digital affordances are realized through social interactions, communication, and human practices during a crisis event depend on not only a given society's technological capabilities but also political opportunities, policy structures, social norms, and cultural conditions based on which publics shape their collective understanding of technologies and risks.

National differences in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic vividly exemplify the sociotechnical complexity in leveraging digital technologies for public risk management. For example, Asian societies have shown proactive adoptions of digital media and technologies as the pandemic response tools, while western societies have taken a rather cautious and passive approach to technology-intensive solutions. Media commentaries have suggested different rationale for such differences. For instance, the *Wall Street Journal* mentioned Confucianism as a cultural prompt for paternalistic digital-driven public health surveillance in South Korea and Japan (Martin & Walker, 2020); the *New York Times* noted that a high level of social trust contributed to South Korean citizens' tolerance for the adoption of digital contact-tracing (Fisher & Sang-Hun, 2020). Meanwhile, Katharin Tai, a German scholar who studies Chinese internet policy at MIT, pointed in her Twitter post that news commentaries overemphasized Asian stereotypes as cultural factors: "I keep hearing that Europe cannot learn #Covid19 strategies from Asia [sic] bc Asians are 'obedient' & not as 'critical' — South Koreans ousted their last president with mass protests, Taiwanese students occupied parliament to protest a trade deal & HK has been protesting for months (Lewis-Kraus, 2020, n.p.)."

These commentaries may be accurate assessments, or they could extend Asian stereotyping. Regardless, those discussions surrounding Asia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic invite scholars to look into the current status of crisis/risk communication in Asia, particularly at the intersection between digital media and the sociopolitical and cultural conditions of each society.

2. Introduction of the Special Issue Articles

This special issue introduces four empirical articles that advance our understanding of how networked Asian societies have been imagined and manifested during a crisis/risk, and what we can learn about crisis sensemaking from networked Asia. Two articles are about COVID-19, one of which is situated in India, and another is in the Malaysian society. South/Southeast Asia has become a new epicenter of the pandemic, with the rampant spread of the Delta variant (Chu & Pookasook, 2021). India and Malaysia are particularly noteworthy nations: India has been overtaken by the virus with numerous deaths, while the country has also been battling for a long time against disinformation on social media (Raj & Goswami, 2020); Malaysia has surpassed India to record "one of South East Asia's highest covid-19 infection rates, with deaths per capita now exceeding India and neighboring Indonesia (Lumpur, 2021, p.1)." Despite the severity of the crisis, relatively little academic attention has been paid to these countries.

Specifically, Alvi and Saraswat's article, titled "Motivation versus intention of sharing fake news among social media users during the pandemic – A SEM model," investigates how various factors (i.e., content, context, fear of missing out, news verification, and news sharing

gratification) affect social media users' fake news sharing motivation and intentions during the pandemic in India. Using the cross-section survey data, the results reveal that news content, news verification, and news sharing gratification were significantly associated with sharing motivation, whereas news context, news content, fear of missing out, and news sharing gratification were significantly related to sharing intention. This study sheds light on the role of digital media during the pandemic, specifically by identifying influential factors for sharing and disseminating fake news on social media.

As the COVID-19 crisis has played a vital role in the Malaysian economy, Mehmood et al.'s article, titled "The reaction of the Malaysian stock market to the COVID-19 pandemic," explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the stock market of different industry indices in Malaysia during the movement control order (MCO). Mehmood et al. comparatively analyze the performance of sectoral indices in each stage of MCO from 2nd January to 29th May 2020. It has been shown that energy, property, and finance sectors were negatively affected by the pandemic and experienced heavy losses while technology, telecommunications, and media were the least affected sectors in all periods. The authors conclude that introducing Economic Stimulus Packages (ESP) by the Government of Malaysia (GoM) helped restore the performance of the industries in general and the investors' confidence in the economy.

The special issue presents another two articles that examine other types of crisis contexts beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the two articles expand the recent scholarship that has examined social media as a risk/crisis reporting and management tool (e.g., Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013) and as a space where collective sensemaking of an uncertain situation occurs (e.g., Kwon, Chadha, & Wang, 2019, Starbird & Palen, 2010,). While both articles are coincidentally contextualized in South Korea, the nature of crisis/risk is very different from each other.

Oh, Jung, and Song's article, titled "Risk communication networks on 2017 Gangneung wildfire in South Korea," examines inter-organizational communication networks represented in Twitter during a major wildfire disaster in South Korea. Oh et al. contend that successful wildfire disaster management requires effective inter-organizational coordination among multiple stakeholders. While social media has the potential to facilitate inter-organizational collaboration through rapid information sharing and flow, Oh et al.'s findings suggest that Korean emergency agencies were not able to utilize social media effectively during the wildfires disaster, by revealing little inter-organizational information flow, failure in meeting the needs of the affected community, and heavy dissemination of non-hazard information such as fundraising rather than the information directly relevant to the emergency assessment.

Meanwhile, Kang's article, titled "Framing North Korea on Twitter: Is network strength related to sentiment?" explores the globally networked framing of North Korea. While this study does not analyze an immediate risk event, North Korea has been a perennial risk factor concerning South Korea's national security. Kang analyzes the sentiment of global tweets about North Korea, finding the overall negative sentiment, especially among the central informational

actors in the North Korea-related conversational network. Considering that public opinion and attention is a critical factor that influences policy decision-making when an international conflict occurs, understanding public sentiments about a foreign --especially adversary --state may offer insight on national security.

To conclude, this special issue introduces four studies that demonstrate scholarly interests at the intersection of risk/crisis and digital media in Asian societies. While these four articles are far from being a comprehensive compilation of crisis/risk communication issues in networked Asia, this special issue may be a good starter to ignite further scholarly conversations and discussions on contemporary risk/crisis management and responses in Asian contexts.

References

Chu, M.M., & Pookasook, A. (July 26, 2021). Southeast Asia's COVID-19 cases hit new highs, Malaysian doctors protest. *Reuters.*
https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/southeast-asia-covid-19-cases-hit-new-highs-malaysian-doctors-protest-2021-07-26/

Cleaveland, A., Newman, J. C., & Weber, S. (2020). The art of communicating risk. *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2020/09/the-art-of-communicating-risk

Fisher, M., & Sang-Hun, C. (April 10, 2020). How South Korea flattened the curve. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/world/asia/coronavirus-south-korea-flatten-curve.html

Kwon, K. H., Chadha, M., & Wang, F. (2019). Proximity and networked news public: Structural topic modeling of global Twitter conversations about the 2017 Quebec mosque shooting. *International Journal of Communication, 13*, 2652–2675.

Lumpur, R. (2021). Covid-19: Malaysia hit by record cases despite prolonged lockdown. *bmj, 374.* https://www.bmj.com/content/374/bmj.n2155

Lewis-Kraus, G. (June 18, 2020). How to make government trustworthy again. Wired.
https://www.wired.com/story/how-to-make-government-trustworthy-again/

Martin, T.W. & Walker, M.(March 13, 2020). East vs. West: Coronavirus fight tests divergent strategies. Wall Street Journal. https://www.wsj.com/articles/east-vs-west-coronavirus-fight-tests-divergent-strategies-11584110308

Oh, O., Agrawal, M., & Rao, H. R. (2013). Community intelligence and social media services: A rumor theoretic analysis of tweets during social crises. *MIS Quarterly, 37*(2), 407-426.

Palen, L., & Anderson, K. M. (2016). Crisis informatics—New data for extraordinary times. *Science, 353*(6296), 224-225.

Raj, A., & Goswami, M. P. (2020). Is fake news spreading more rapidly than COVID-19 in India. Journal of Content, Community and Communication, 11(10), 208-220.

Starbird, K., & Palen, L. (2010, May). Pass it on?: Retweeting in mass emergency. In Proceedings of the 7th International ISCRAM Conference, Seattle, USA, May 2010.