

Book Review

Seo, H. (2022). *Networked Collective Actions: The Making of an Impeachment*. Oxford University Press.

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South Korea is home to some of the most impressive social movements since the late 20th century. Three decades after the 1987 democracy movement, Koreans again ousted a corrupt government with citizen protests in 2016. Books that capture not only the uniqueness of such feats but use them to advance theories of democratic movements in the world, however, have been few and far between. Hyunjin Seo's *Networked Collective Actions: The Making of an Impeachment* (Seo, 2022) is a much-needed addition to the growing literature on collective action, written from the intersection of media and politics.

With the book, Seo proposes a theory to understand large-scale collective actions in modern democracies. Some of the most notable works in the area come from social scientists like Manuel Castells (2004, 2011) and Yochai Benkler (2006), who have coined terms like networked society and networked economy to explain changes wrought by information communication technologies like decentralization and nonhierarchical cooperation worldwide. A related body of work also comes from political communication scholars like Bimber et al. (2005), who call for more contextual understanding of technology, warning scholars away from myopic focus on individual technologies or measurable variables.

Seo's *agent-affordance framework* considers three factors: types of agents, interactions between agents, and affordances available to them. There are four types of agents: individuals (journalists, activists, and social media influencers), groups (ones formed on KakaoTalk, Band, or Facebook), organizations (government entities, media outlets, and NGOs), and non-human algorithms such as bots. Affordances include three categories: platform, network infrastructure, and sociopolitical system. The resulting theory thus answers calls by scholars for a more comprehensive theory on conflicts and activism that does not remain within disciplinary silos, one that takes into consideration "political, economic, social, and environmental resources structures possibilities

for social change” (Wilkins et al., 2014, p. 140, cited by author, p. 20). The framework Seo provides is inherently versatile and inclusive, reflecting the challenges brought on by digital technologies of different kinds and applicable to both non-Western and Western contexts.

Armed with the nimbleness of this theory, Seo offers us a thorough account of the collective action in 2016 that led to the successful impeachment of Park Geun-hye in South Korea. In Chapter 3, she provides contextual background on the media and information landscape. The country has a relatively robust and diverse media sector, but still suffered setbacks in press freedoms during the Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) regimes (p. 33). South Korea also has one of the highest penetration rates of high-speed Internet in the world, at 96.16% in 2020 (p. 35). As a result, a higher percentage of Koreans use social media, at around 87%, than almost any other country in the world. The ubiquity of social media in turn led to more social protests. The politics of a divided Korean peninsula, coupled with the legacies of dictatorship, has resulted in citizens uniquely passionate and polarized at the same time.

In Chapter 4, Seo provides the direct backdrop of the 2016 protests by elaborating on cultural and tactical significance of the Sewol Ferry incident and three previous rounds of candlelit protests in 21st century South Korea: one in 2002 protesting deaths of two teenage Korean girls by a US armored vehicle; another in 2004 against the attempted impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun by the conservatives; and yet another in 2008 by citizens protesting government’s decision to import US beef deemed inferior. In contrast to studies that focus overwhelmingly on political institutions and ideology, the book stands out for masterful weaving of changes in South Korea, including the techno, social and cultural environments. In the 1980s, the pro-democracy protests had been organized by young college students and intellectuals. During 2002, 2004, and 2008 protests, the actors were

more multigenerational and heterogeneous in makeup. Seo shows where the technological affordances like Internet webcasts and bulletin boards came into play.

The Sewol Ferry disaster in 2014, in which some 300 people, mostly high school students, died, provided a significant impetus for Park’s impeachment. The unspeakable death of high school students revealed the corruption and utter ineptitude of Park’s regime. The resulting grief and anger contributed to the offline and online actions against Park. Seo’s findings on the emotional dimension of social movements go nicely with works by scholars who are increasingly looking into the importance of emotions in various junctures of communication and public life (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). The author is at her best where she shows how agents affect changes in affordances. For example, South Koreans flocked to the encrypted messaging service Telegram when the Park Geun-hye government started cracking down on the domestic messenger service Kakao. This fear, in turn, made Kakao adopt stronger encryption services.

The centerpiece of this is her analysis of the 2016 protests. With a historian’s eye for details, Seo walks us through the oft left out but important details on individuals and platforms. Seo shows how key agents—“news media as catalysts, social media influencers and bots as amplifiers, citizens as accelerators, and civic movements as facilitators” (p. 78)—interacted to oust Park from office. Notably, her interviewees includes lay citizens from all walks of life in addition to the elites and journalists, which enables her to capture the emotional dimensions such as outrage and embarrassment. The wealth of interviews also allows her to describe the geographical and tactile significance of the offline protests for people who were there with friends and family. Citizens talk about how transformative it was for them to stand in the center of Gwanghwamun square in cold of the winter, a space replete with historical and political significance of modern Korea. They

described what a spectacle it was to see a million candles lit by friends, families, women, children, and senior citizens. Seo shows how understanding such power of offline communication channels is just as crucial in understanding how the movement mobilized a wide swath of citizens, including those less interested in politics.

The book goes on to pay attention to the far-right groups whose fealty to the disgraced president continues to this date. The South Korean version of conspiracy theories, rejection of even mainstream conservative news outlets, and the burrow-one's-head-in-the-sand patterns of confirmation biases, comes with a stronger tinge of anti-Communism compared to the pro-Trump movements in the US. Supporters and sympathizers of the far-right feel alienated (many of them are elderly with a high rate of poverty), and share a nostalgia for the 1970s, when Park's father Chung-hee propelled South Korea from depths of poverty with his martial rule. In parallel to the rise of "alternative" platforms like Parler among the right-wing in the US who deserted mainstream media, Park's supporters relied less on traditional media platforms and looked to non-mainstream far-right platforms for information. For these people, withdrawing support for daughter Park was a tall order. Changing one's mind about a political icon is hard, no matter how corrupt and inept a political leader is. So what caused a not-so-insignificant portion of them to withdraw their allegiance and support Park's impeachment, as polls indicate? This might be the single most crucial question for people yearning for healthier public spheres in democracies. To explain how this was possible, Seo shows that people who changed their minds usually belonged to multiple group chat rooms on KakaoTalk or Band, including ones by their children and grandchildren who lean liberal. "Seeing my children and some of my friends so riled up about President Park gave me a pause for my support for the president," said one interviewee (p. 112). In a Habermasian fashion, Seo even takes us

to physical billiard halls. A newly instituted smoking ban led to the infusion of more women and younger people into the halls, which allowed them to mingle with the older, mostly male clientele. The billiard halls became the coffee houses of the 21st century (pp. 111-112).

In the last substantive chapter Seo takes us to the near-present, with the progressive Moon Jae-in administration getting its own pushback by the right-wing conservatives. As the 2022 presidential election shows, Korea remains a bitterly divided country ideologically and geographically. I wish the author could have gone deeper into ramifications for democratic theories, which was mentioned only briefly in the last chapter before the conclusion. Of particular interest is how the people's aspirations for direct democracies, coupled with a populist fervor to take politics and media into people's own hands, played a role in Korea, whose democracy has been characterized as "protest-led reform," "movement-driven transition," or "movement-politics" (Cho, 2016; Kim & Jeong, 2017; Shin & Moon, 2017) (p. 138). Also noteworthy is the propensity of citizens to operate neither as individuals nor organizations but more at the meso-level as fan clubs or affinity groups of individual causes. A deeper exploration of these issues requires a close dialogue between communication scholars with their peers in philosophy and political science, which Seo has started here. The book is thus replete with other opportunities for future research, particularly on networked collective actions in Asia, the Middle East, or Sub-Saharan Africa.

Raising the bar further, there were a couple of places where I thought the author could have done more. Although her analysis is generally holistic, at times she is guilty of the crime all of us as media researchers commit from time to time, of being media-centric. For example, I would have liked to see the mention of the city-level regulatory environment which made the 2016 protests possible. The Seoul Metropolitan

Government led by the progressive mayor Park Won-soon played a significant role by approving large gatherings in Gwanghwamun Square of city center in the first place, without which the offline momentum of the vigils could not have materialized. Also, while explaining bots as non-human agents is noteworthy, the bots mentioned here amounted to little more than isolated cases of corporate publicity stunts during the 2016 protests. Six years later in 2022, the bots have obviously become important in understanding networked social movements.

Stylistically, I found the book's conciseness – at only 144 pages excluding references – to be a weakness at times. Seo exercises extreme restraint by hewing close to the core argument and rarely offering us more than what is necessary. I found myself wanting more details from the interviews and research at crucial junctures in 2016, like the songs they sang, the banners people brought, and the way the air smelled. In a similar vein, I wanted to hear more of the author's own voice, knowing Hyunjin Seo herself has worked as a reporter during the Roo Moo-hyun era covering the presidential office, which she mentions only briefly in the earlier pages. Written by a former journalist who saw the major transformation of South Korean politics in early 21st century, the book could have taken fuller advantage of the author's experience as a participant observant.

In conclusion, Seo's book offers a solid introduction for those interested in not only networked collective actions but also a brief history of contemporary South Korean politics. In addition to proposing a grand theory that could tie what happened during the South Korean protests and with developments in places like Egypt and Chile, Seo is convincing in her argument that "South Korea's long history of citizen protests, citizens' collective sense of national pride, and the rapid developments of technological affordances" (p. 144) contributed to the impeachment. The book would make great reading for instructors teaching media activism

and social change. It would also be a good fit for courses on contemporary Korean society, alongside book by Nan Kim (2017) coming from a more critical tradition.

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