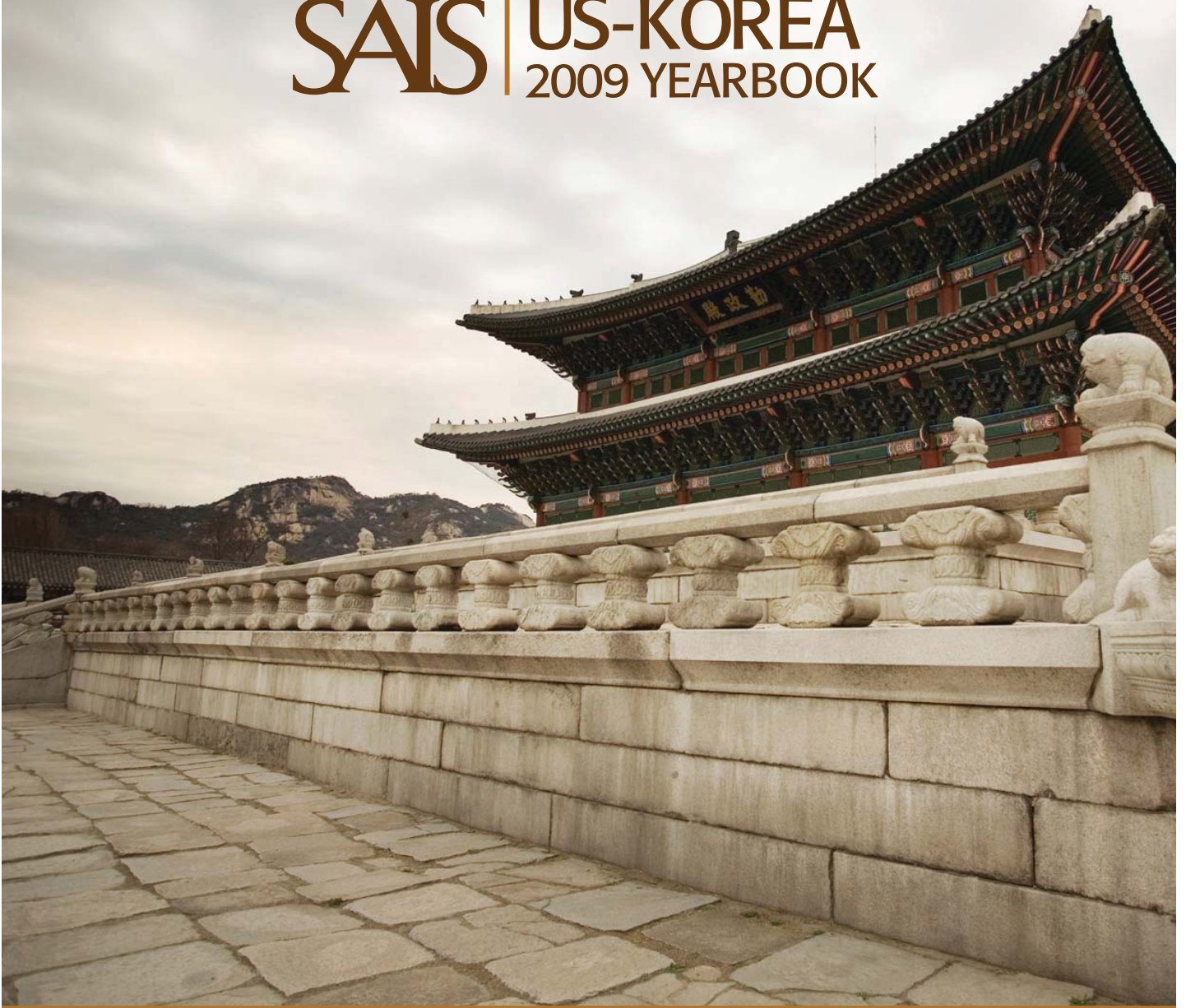


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JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

KOREAN MEDIA BIAS AND GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN MEDIA

By Ian Howard

I. INTRODUCTION

The power of the media in South Korea, in all forms, has a profound influence on the events that shape South Korea. There have been numerous instances of media bias, defined here as manipulation of the media to support a certain perception, cause, or agenda, particularly for the purpose of anti-Americanism or government opposition. The latest incarnation of this media influence manifested itself in the beef protests in 2008, which occurred because of false information and rumors that directly challenged the Korean government. While the topical issue was the opening of the Korean market to American beef, closer examination shows that the media was intentionally manipulated to stir sentiment against the incumbent president. The government has taken action to hold responsible those that purposely spread false information and has taken steps to improve media responsibility. However, these steps, including making government appointments to top broadcast positions, implementing the internet real-name system, and allowing newspapers to own shares of broadcast companies, are likely in the long term to have negative effects on Korea's right to free speech.

II. LEAD-UP TO THE PROTESTS

American beef imports were suspended in South Korea twice before: once in 2003 after an outbreak of mad cow disease in the United States, and again in 2007 when bone chips were found in shipments. American beef imports have been a point of contention between the United States and Korea in negotiating a free trade agreement. In April 2008, the two countries once again entered negotiations. The United States firmly stated that Congress would not ratify

the agreement if Korea did not lift its ban on beef. On the other hand, Korea demanded that imports be restricted to only certain parts of cattle under a certain age. On April 17, Assistant Agriculture Minister Min Dong-seok, the chief negotiator for the Korean side, said, “The two sides remain far divided and the gap is too deep,” and “We will continue the talks if there is the possibility for a deal. But if not, we will halt the talks.” However, the next day, April 18, it was announced that the two sides had come to an agreement in which Korea had given in to nearly all of the United States’ demands relating to beef. The suddenness of the agreement and the amount of concessions the Korean side gave engendered discontent among the populace for kowtowing to U.S. demands. Many believed that the sudden agreement was a gift to Bush for the April 18-19 summit meeting Lee Myung-bak attended at Camp David. It would be the first time for a Korean president to be invited to Camp David for a summit.

A television broadcast on April 29th, however, was the catalyst that set off mass demonstrations against Lee Myung-bak regarding the safety of American beef that nearly brought the Korean government to a standstill. MBC’s *PD Notebook*, an investigative journalism program, broadcast a special on the dangers of consuming American beef. Three days after the broadcasts, the beef protest, which lasted throughout the summer, began. It is said that these were the biggest protests in twenty years and that up to 2 million people participated. The streets leading up to the Blue House were barricaded with police buses and oiled shipping containers to keep protestors away, candlelight vigils eventually led to violence and arrests, and mass hysteria swept the country. Eventually, nine out of ten of Lee Myung-bak’s cabinet resigned, the Korean government was forced to renegotiate the FTA, and, according to the Korea Economic Research Institute, an estimated loss of roughly 3.75 trillion won, or \$2.97 billion, occurred.

PD Notebook Misinformation

The content of MBC’s *PD Notebook*, which ignited the beef protests, when examined closely exhibits the intent to misinform the public on the dangers of importing American beef. In this section, we will compare specific points of contention mentioned in the broadcast with contradicting facts.

“Downer cows,” or cows that are unable to stand or walk by themselves, were prominently featured in the program as carriers of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), more commonly known as mad cow disease. In the program, *PD Notebook*, while showing U.S. downer cows being forced to

slaughter, implied that BSE was the primary cause of downer cows and that the United States was still slaughtering them for human consumption. However, it has been determined that the original footage used was shot by the Humane Society for the purpose of showing animal cruelty, not mad cow disease. While BSE can cause cattle to be downer cows, there are numerous other reasons for the condition to occur, none of which were mentioned in the broadcast. This is analogous with saying all deaths are the result of heart attacks.

The program also cited the research of a Hallym University professor, Kim Yong-Sun, in its claim that Koreans are two to three times more susceptible to contract BSE from eating U.S. imported beef because of a gene that Koreans have. The gene in question, methionine-methionine, was claimed to be found in about 94 percent of Koreans, far more than in Americans, of whom about 37 percent have it. *PD Notebook* misinterpreted the ratio of these two percentages to mean that Koreans are two to three more times likely to contract BSE. Later, this was further misinterpreted to state that 94 percent of Koreans will contract the disease. Kim denied these claims, saying that his research was taken out of context and misunderstood.

Another claim made by the program was that Americans only ate beef aged twenty months or below and exported the rest to unsuspecting countries such as South Korea. This is most likely an allusion to the fact that the United States at the time imported only beef less than 20 months from Canada. A closer look at the facts shows that at the time there were far more cases of BSE in Canada than in the United States; the decision by the United States to *import* only beef that was less than 20 months is consistent with this fact, as beef that was 30 months or older was believed to be more susceptible to BSE. Since 1993, there have only been 3 cases of BSE in the United States, while there have been 17 cases in Canada. This does not indicate consumption percentages by the United States. In fact, American consumption of beef aged thirty months or older is quite common.

However, the most damning portion of the program was the segment dedicated to the late Aretha Vinson, an American woman who the program claimed was a victim of mad cow disease. During an interview, the victim's mother stated that the cause of her daughter's condition was Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or CJD, a rare disease that has no relation to eating beef. The subtitles, however, translated CJD as vCJD, a variant of the disease believed to be caused by eating beef. The producers of the show claimed that they believed the mother, someone not likely to misunderstand the details of her daughter's case, had confused the

two terms. The show also edited an interview with the victim's doctor in such a way that made it seem that there was no question that vCJD was the cause. It was later determined that Aretha Vinson had passed away from Wernicke's encephalopathy.

MBC's main defense against allegations of media misconduct was translation errors. Jeong Ji-min, the program's translator, took exception to this and made repeated claims that she had warned the production staff that the translations the producers wanted did not properly convey the meanings of the interviews. Primary instances of this were mistranslating CJD as vCJD during the Vinson segment and using "cow suspected of being infected with mad cow disease" instead of "downer cow" and "mad cow disease-infected cow" instead of "dairy cow." Jeong further claims that these were not mistranslations, but an intentional misrepresentation of the facts. The scenes of downer cows contrasted with the emotional footage of the then hospitalized Vinson quickly spread apocryphal rumors about the dangers of American beef and resulted in the mass demonstrations.

Further supporting the claim of media bias are emails prosecutors found belonging to one Kim Eun-hee, a scriptwriter for *PD Notebook*. In an email dated April 18, 2008, she states, "While I've been looking for an item for *PD Notebook*, I was looking for ways to release my indignation over the outcome of the general election." In another dated June 7, 2008, she states, "I really get into making a program one or two times a year. ...This year's mad cow disease was one of them. I think that was because anger over Lee Myung-bak was at a peak at that time after the general election. Because I'm still very interested in the 'fate of Lee,' I've spent a lot of time watching the candlelight vigils and looking at Agora on Daum [a popular online forum]."

Jeong's statements and Kim's emails indicate that there was a clear intention to distort facts, and prosecutors have indicted four producers and Kim for their roles. In addition, in 2009, an MBC union held an internal survey of senior staff that indicates just how susceptible the media can be. Of 81 respondents, 46 percent stated that coverage was partial, while only 12 percent believed it to be impartial.

However, a more puzzling question is, how can a single instance of poor and manipulative journalism ignite such public frenzy?

The Internet

While the catalyst for the beef protests was the broadcast of MBC's *PD Notebook*, the spread of misinformation was compounded by the internet. After the broadcast, online websites, forums, and chat rooms became flooded with opinions, rumors, and misconceptions in the guise of truth and facts. Unsubstantiated claims that numerous products, such as diapers, instant noodles, and cosmetics, might expose consumers to the risk of contracting mad cow disease because of possible beef by-products that might be found in their ingredients spread throughout the internet and engulfed the general populace in widespread fear. There was also a widely held belief that direct contact, either by a person or an item, would spread the disease.

Considering that nearly 77 percent of the population in Korea uses the internet, the importance and influence of the internet and the online Korean community cannot be understated. To demonstrate just how powerful the Korean online community is, South Korea's sixteenth president, Roh Moo-hyun, a leftist-leaning candidate, narrowly won the 2003 election due to online support. OhmyNews, a website where anyone can submit "news" articles, pioneered this new form of media, became an alternative source of information that challenged traditional sources of news and information, and is credited for successfully rallying young Koreans to vote for Roh Moo-hyun. In fact, in recognition of the importance of the internet community on his gaining the presidency, Roh Moo-hyun granted his first interview after winning the election to OhmyNews.

Roh Moo-hyun's victory demonstrated and legitimized the power that young Koreans held by embracing the internet. While Korean society and the world in general took notice of the significance of this new form of media, this newfound legitimacy engendered widespread participation that exacerbated the issue of misinformation, bias, hidden agendas, and opinions being mistaken for facts, therefore becoming a leading factor behind the panic and protests about importing American beef.

Regarding the beef riots, this newfound internet influence was in the form of the Agora forums on the Daum web portal. Agora was the online center of anti-government sentiment, where members could voice their criticisms of Lee and his policies. Beef protests were also often organized through Agora. So influential were these forums that they were able to record hit counts in the billions and gather 1.4 million signatures for the impeachment of Lee.

III. HISTORY

However, this still fails to explain how a single program and the popularity of the internet could cause such a failure in truth. For this, an examination of traditional news media must be undertaken to understand how the new online media has risen to such heights of popularity.

Throughout the twentieth century, Korea's traditional media had been plagued by government censorship and control. All through modern Korean history, from the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula, when news dailies were constantly at odds with Japanese censors, until 1941, when the occupation government outlawed all Korean language publications, and until even today, the Korean media is constantly inhibited from conducting independent news coverage. After the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, the period of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) saw a resurgence of newspapers, periodicals, and radio. However, even under this American-led administration, the media was covertly controlled to minimize leftist or communist influence over the South Korean population. This was achieved with the ratification of Ordinance 88 in May 1946, a measure under which newspapers and periodicals must have a license before being able to publish.

Despite the suppression of Korean media by Japanese powers, it is arguable that Korea faced just as much opposition to free media from its own government, becoming a casualty of political infighting and totalitarian control as the nation made its painful journey to becoming a democratic nation. South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee, despite guaranteeing freedom of speech according to Korea's constitution, modeled after the American constitution, ultimately decided to continue enforcing Ordinance 88 to restrict leftist newspapers and periodicals. Rhee further restricted the media as he saw them as a threat to his power, including shutting down the *Kyunghyang* newspaper, the main opposition publication, and other moderate newspapers. He also issued a set of guidelines to publishers in order to ensure that certain articles would not be published. Violating these guidelines or failing to have the proper license led to many arrests during Rhee's administration.

After Park Chung-hee's government takeover in 1961, 49 out of 64 dailies were shut down, therefore increasing the influence of the state's official news agencies. Under such measures, the government was able to encourage an atmosphere of self-censorship over the South Korean media. In 1963, Park

eliminated the media licensing system in favor of a registration system that better allowed the government to keep track of publishing and broadcasting companies and organizations. After 1970, Park implemented the Declaration of the State of National Emergency and the Martial Law Decree, which banned all assemblies and demonstrations for political activities, speeches, publications, press, and broadcasts, further eliminating the press's ability to provide unbiased news coverage. After Park's Yushin Constitution was declared in 1972, press freedom was further marginalized, as the constitution declared that freedom of speech could be restricted if deemed necessary. This allowed Park to later implement the Emergency Measure, which banned all publications and distributions of media in relation to the National Federation of Democratic Youths and Students, a group Park's government declared illegal for being anti-establishment and controlled by North Korea. However, Park was able to manipulate the media through indirect means as well. This is demonstrated by the government's retaliation in 1975 against *Dong-A* newspaper for government criticism, by pressuring businesses to withdraw their advertising contracts with the daily. Park's representatives sent to these businesses were often from the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA).

The Fifth Republic of Chun Doo-hwan, for the most part, continued the anti-media policies of his predecessor. His constitution also guaranteed freedom of speech and publication, but these "freedoms" were limited due to a provision that stated that the press was liable for damages if someone's reputation was violated. In addition, they were also liable if they violated social ethics or morals. Because of this possibility of being sued for damages, there was very little criticism against government officials and influential people. The media in Chun's administration were also subject to "guidelines" that limited the reporting they could do. In addition, independent broadcasting companies were absorbed into the state's official news agency, many provincial papers were shut down, central papers were prohibited from having local correspondents permanently placed outside of Seoul, and KBS, the government broadcast station, absorbed two independent broadcasting stations. The Basic Press Act of 1980 further gave the government various reasons to shut down media outlets. In order to promote government support within the media, the state set the professional qualifications for reporters and journalists. Enforcement of these rules were potentially quite violent. As a result of the military regimes of both Park and Chun, in 1987 there were only 32 daily newspapers in South Korea, and hundreds of journalists resigned, were jailed, or were forced out of their positions.

It was not until after 1988, when Roh Tae-woo, South Korea's first democratically elected leader, came to power that media reforms were put into effect to undo the oppression of newspaper and broadcast companies. Although traditional Korean media now operates in an environment of free speech, damage had already been done in that public perception of the press is that newspapers and broadcasts are government controlled and cannot be trusted. The feeling of betrayal the people felt against the government and media can best be exemplified by the Gwangju Massacre, in which Chun deployed paratroopers and regular troops to quell a rebellion. Official estimates claim 200 deaths, but other sources place the number between one and two thousand. While rumors abounded, it was not until the media reforms that the general populace became aware that the massacre had occurred. Most Koreans felt lied to and manipulated by the media and government and further fomented a distrust of traditional media that lasts to this day.

In addition to media suppression, the early Korean regimes, especially those of Park and Chun, resulted in another phenomenon that further bred distrust of traditional Korean media: media conglomerates. Due to the repressive policies on the media during Park and Chun's regimes, media companies evolved from small businesses to monopolies that today wield great power.

Because the government often shut down newspapers and broadcast stations for dissenting opinions from the 1960s to the 1980s, the majority of those companies that remained were, more often than not, those that supported the military regimes of the time. In addition, buyouts and absorption of independent and smaller companies by either the government or companies that supported the government often occurred. To this day, there is widespread cross-ownership within broadcasting, periodicals, and newspapers. The end result was an environment in which very few media conglomerates, most of which supported the government, ruled the Korean media industry. In fact, members of the private media corporations were often rewarded by the government in the forms of interest-free loans, tax favors, political offices, bureaucratic roles, and government positions. They also were given access to public funds for overseas travel, housing loans, money for their children's education, and the more traditional forms of graft, cash and gifts. Therefore, journalists in the larger media conglomerates were quite wealthy, influential, and often accused of being in the pockets of government officials and focusing on "news" that was to their own monetary benefit. In addition, because the media industry was ruled by a few powerful media conglomerates, they were able to take advantage of their market strength to earn high incomes from subscriptions and especially

advertising. This further embedded into Korean society a permanence of a restricted media, in which only a few small companies could influence the majority of the population while using their monopoly power to prevent smaller companies from entering the market. Within this environment, there was little incentive for these conglomerates to challenge government restrictions, for doing so would reduce their own economic and political advantages.

Looking upon the history of modern Korean media, it comes as no surprise that there is still a latent distrust of traditional media that permeates Korean society to this day; the media is widely believed to be corrupt and in the hands of government or big business. For all intents and purposes, free speech has existed only since 1987—just 22 years compared to the repressed or government-controlled media that existed since Japanese colonial rule. In light of this, it is only natural that internet news sites were embraced as they were, despite their lack of journalistic credentials, distortions of truth, and tendency to substitute opinion for fact. Many people viewed online sites such as Agora as an alternative source of information free from the constraints of government and business control.

Some may question *PD Notebook*'s influence over the public, as it is a member of one of these distrusted conglomerates. However, *PD Notebook* had two advantages in this regard. The first was that in 2005, *PD Notebook* aired a show questioning the veracity of the work done by Hwang Woo-suk, a scientist who claimed breakthroughs in human stem cell research. At the time, Hwang was being portrayed as a national hero and was a symbol of Korean patriotism. *PD Notebook* was vilified for being unpatriotic by questioning Hwang's integrity and was forced off the air for several weeks. Eventually, it was realized that Hwang fabricated the majority of his research, and *PD Notebook* was vindicated. This gave the program a reputation for accuracy and honesty. The second advantage was that in the media environment today, any report against the government is accepted more readily than reports supporting the government. This perfect storm of circumstances allowed *PD Notebook*'s broadcast to be far more influential than it should have been. Within this environment, it should come as no surprise that the combination of *PD Notebook* and the online community led to the widespread misinformation that resulted in the beef riots.

IV. REPERCUSSIONS

Although the beef riots endangered the stability of the nation, the long-term negative effects on South Korea's foreign relations may prove more damaging to the country. The beef riots that paralyzed Seoul forced Lee Myung-bak to renegotiate the already agreed upon KORUS FTA. This set a dangerous precedent, as the renegotiation process was understood to have been brought about by the government's inability to communicate with an uninformed public and characterized the South Korean government as unable to honor its contractual agreements. This damaged the credibility of South Korea and may have put the country at a disadvantage for all future negotiations. To emphasize this point, the Obama administration will likely call for another renegotiation of KORUS FTA in order to make it more favorable to U.S. interests and it will have the precedent of South Korea's renegotiation on its side. In other words, South Korea may have given up a long-term advantage for a short-term gain.

Economically, these protests have resulted in nearly \$3 billion in damages from loss of sales, damages to private and public property, diversion of public funds to handle the protests, and losses resulting from the inability of the government to implement cost-cutting programs. However, the damages go beyond these figures as the beef protests have caused investors, foreign and domestic, to lose confidence in the South Korean market. Soon after the protests, a survey found that out of 1,000 foreign companies investing in Korea, 70 percent said they were reluctant to continue investing in Korea. This lack of investor confidence could cost the country billions in unrealized gains, and it could take years before they can regain enough credibility to bring back old investors and entice new ones to the Korean market.

V. COUNTERMEASURES

Soon after the riots, the Lee administration began taking steps to regulate the media to curb its influence. The two most significant changes have been to replace top leadership of several broadcast stations with people friendly to the Lee government and to implement the internet real-name system. While these measures may help to curb media abuse in the short run, government intervention will only hinder the Korean media's development towards becoming a more responsible institution.

To regain control of the media, the Lee government took steps to take control

of major broadcast stations, in particular MBC and KBS, leading stations that were especially critical of the government. In August 2008, the Broadcasting and Communications Commission (BCC) removed the KBS head, Chung Yeon-ju, for poor management and replaced him with Kim In-gyu. Choi Si-jung, head of the BCC, was widely considered to be Lee's mentor and was also Lee's campaign advisor. Kim In-gyu was an aide to Lee during his presidential campaign. Gu Bon-hong, a former Lee strategist, was appointed to the Yonhap Television News station (YTN). He later stepped down due to protest within YTN. Lee Myung-rong, a Lee campaign advisor, was appointed to head SkyLife, a digital satellite broadcaster. Chung Kuk-lok, a Lee campaign aide, was appointed to Arirang TV, an English-language channel targeting foreign audiences. Yang Hwee-boo, who assisted Lee during his campaign, was appointed to the Korean Broadcasting Advertising Corporation (KOBACO). This appointment is especially important as KOBACO sells advertising time on behalf of broadcasters. In short, businesses that are not supportive of Lee may find their advertising and marketing abilities compromised, allowing for strong government influence over media and business.

As for MBC, Ohm Ki-young, president and CEO, tendered his resignation in December 2009 after failing to satisfy the Foundation for Broadcast Culture, a 70 percent stakeholder in MBC, with a reform plan meant to improve fairness and accuracy in MBC's news coverage. The head of the Foundation for Broadcast Culture is Kim U-ryong, a former media advisor to Lee. In the end, Ohm's resignation was not accepted. According to the Yonhap News Agency, an industry insider stated that there was an "understanding" between the government and Ohm. The details of that understanding have yet to be made public.

While it is true that the failure of the Korean media to maintain accuracy and fairness resulted in the near paralysis of the Korean government and that measures need to be taken to prevent a reoccurrence of such a failure, the government's actions in replacing the heads of these broadcast stations will likely hurt Korea's freedom of speech in the long run despite any short-run gains in journalistic integrity. The speed and forcefulness of these replacements only support the notion that Korea has yet to realize a free media outside the influence of government. While previous administrations have also manipulated media appointments to their advantage, because Lee did so soon after the riots, accusations of government control and opposition have become stronger; many fear Lee's policies are a backward step towards the policies of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. While the comparison seems exaggerated, Lee's

appointments are more than likely to result in inaccurate and biased news in favor of the government. In addition, the practice of appointing media heads only encourages and solidifies media inaccuracy and bias regardless of the politics of future administrations.

Another policy that the Lee administration put into effect earlier this year was the internet real-name system, in which the public must register their real name and identification number for any website that has a readership of over 100,000 people. This was intended to rein in the influence of the internet by holding responsible those who intentionally spread false rumors, misinformation, and slander. Those found guilty face no more than two years in jail and a fine of up to 10 million won. It was the result of a BCC-originated amendment to the Information Act.

The most famous offender was Park Dae-sung, also known as Minerva. Park regularly posted on Agora. He regularly made economic forecasts, including the fall of Lehman Brothers, which came true, making him a public sensation and gaining him a wide following. Despite his being an anonymous poster on an internet board, his posts were so influential that more of the public found him to be a better source of information than the government in economic matters. After his arrest, it was discovered that he was unemployed and had no more than a two-year degree.

The biggest difficulty with this new regulation is that it inhibits individuals' free speech regardless of their intent and can be abused by the government, which would like to silence opinions incongruent with the administration's. This may seem an exaggeration, but the fact that the government has shown its willingness to arrest Park has demonstrated its intent to influence speech on the internet. The real-name system will make it easier for them to do so. Anonymity encourages free speech, and to make mandatory the registration of names and ID numbers would be equivalent to government monitoring, further inflaming opposition and public confidence.

A third measure taken by the Lee administration is the passage of media reforms allowing cross-ownership of broadcast companies by newspaper companies and private firms. In the past, in order to minimize media control, the two mediums were kept separate in order to reduce excessive media control. However, in legalizing cross-ownership, the administration claims that the increased competition will result in more channels and more balance.

This very well may be true. However, there is just as much a chance that this will also lead to media bias in favor of the government. Cross-ownership is likely to support Lee's conservative government, as most broadcast stations are considered liberal and anti-Lee, while the major newspapers are considered conservative. Coupled with Lee's appointments to the broadcast companies, this gives the government much influence over the media.

Lastly, the indictment of the five *PD Notebook* staff members is also dangerous to the health of Korea's right to free speech. While there is little doubt that facts were manipulated, arresting reporters inhibits media's role as a government watchdog.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Lee administration, in attempting to rectify media abuse, has put into place measures that will only solidify media bias and has set a dangerous precedent for future administrations. The root of the problem stems from the lack of public trust in Korea's media, and government intervention will only legitimize claims that Korea does not have a free press. The influence of the internet is another manifestation of the public's lack of confidence in traditional media, as illustrated by Minerva's ability to influence Korea's economics. Therefore, if the government's goal truly is to shape a free press, it should minimize its presence from the media industry. On the other hand, journalistic integrity remains an issue for which no clear answer exists. Rather, Korean media needs more time to develop and evolve. The beef protests, while damaging to Korea's economy and reputation, have exposed the dangers of media bias. While it is the people's right and responsibility to protest their government if they feel their needs are not being addressed, it is the responsibility of the media to provide the public with accurate facts that they can base their own opinions and actions on. To that extent, the beef protests may have been a necessity, as change rarely occurs until after a catastrophe. To support the Korean media's development towards journalistic integrity, it must be kept free of government intervention. Unfortunately, Lee's policies may have only prolonged the journey to a free media.



U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS
1740 Massachusetts Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
www.uskoreainstitute.org



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UNIVERSITY