

Role of Media Played in Sewol Ferry Disaster

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Sewol Ferry Disaster

On April 16, 2014, the Sewol ferry, which carried 476 passengers, sank while sailing from Incheon to Jeju Island and caused 304 passengers dead, which 250 were high school students going on a school trip.



1. As a platform for the public to obtain neutral and accurate information about disasters, how did news media perform?

Failed to Deliver Accurate Facts

- Large scale of false report claiming “all passengers are saved”¹
- MBC, KBS and MBC exaggerated the number of rescuers²
- news media did not go through **fact-checking process** before reporting
- WHY? : Fierce competition in Korean news media industry**
 - competing to be the first one reporting the breaking news
 - focused on speed of reporting, instead of accuracy
 - made “reports by dictation” (받아쓰기식 보도)³ without fact-checking



Acted as a Political Instrument of Government and Political Party

Government utilized news media to free from accountability

- KBS edited the voice of bereaved families’ protest to President Park towards the slow rescue progress⁴
- President forced KBS to edit or delete reports criticizing Coast Guard’s inefficient response to the disaster⁵

Through **censorship**, Korean government:

- Manipulated public opinion
- Prevent public collective action to hold government accountable for the disaster



Progressive camps utilized news media to gain more supporters

- Raised suspicions on government’s misconducts by using suspicion frame
- Undermined public’s trust on government
- Gained supporters who think progressive camp is actively seeking the truth of the disaster

E.g. JTBC’s program “Lee Kyu-yeon’s Spotlight”

- retorted upon on the investigation results provided by the government⁶
- pushed forward “submarine theory” as the real cause of sinking⁷
- government was then further suspected of hiding the truth of disaster



2. How did social media fostered the two largest protests aftermath, namely Yellow Ribbon Protest and Candlelight Vigil?

Forming Collective Identity Mobilizing Protest Participation

1. Via Sentiments
 - Social media users expressed their condolence, sorrow and anger
 - People sharing the same sentiment sympathies with each other
 - Formed a collective identity, which drove them to develop a sense of working collectively towards the same goal⁸
2. Via Information Network
 - algorithm function + hashtag function¹⁰
 - Spread political / protest related information
 - Built information network connecting individual social media users
 - Extended network to potential protest participant

Mobilizing Resources for Protests

1. Uncensored Information
 - Bypassed the gatekeeping function of existing media⁹
 - especially when mainstream news media are not trusted by the public¹¹
2. Protest Situation Via Live Broadcast
 - Protesters ask for support if they need any help
 - Help better protest coordination¹²
3. Funding
 - “Park Geun-hack dot.com” collected more than 70 million won funding via promoting on social media¹³

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8. Yun, Seongyi, and Min, Hee. “Does Social Media Promote Participatory Democracy? Evidence from South Korea’s Presidential Impeachment Protests?” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 12, 2020, pp. 2073

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11. Ibid.

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