New Media in Seoul After Midnight

A dispatch on the arts, technologies and cultures in the metropolitan community served by the Seoul airport.

by Jon Phillips

Seoul, South Korea, the third-largest metropolitan area in the world, has approximately 22 million people living in close proximity to one another, all connected to multiple media. To explain new media in Seoul after midnight, it must be noted that Koreans are a very social people, utilizing all forms of media for the extension of relationships. Also, the physical city is highly networked, with efficient, inexpensive public transit, the circulatory system of Seoul. Midnight is when mass transit stops each day and, consequently, is the threshold at which a group of friends must decide where to go and/or stay for the night. They must decide if their meeting is to continue with an all-night social activity in one general location or if the group will physically separate to persist virtually on-line via cell phones, text messages and chatting or latently through social network services and blogging.

The Koreans’ strong focus on relationships and unity is an influence on the homogeneity of media in the country. While Pi Sheng of China invented movable type in A.D. 1040, using clay blocks that broke easily [1], Korean typesetters in the 13th century developed a more robust metal-block typesetting technique to create civil service tests and religious texts such as Da Xue Yan Yi (Scriptures on Confucianism) [2], thus increasing the duplication of literature throughout the Korean Goryeo Dynasty.

This homogeneity of media is also supported historically with the invention of Hangul, the ingenious phonetic writing system developed by King Sejong in 1446. Prior to Hangul, complicated pictographic Chinese characters primarily taught only to the aristocracy were used to represent Korean speech. King Sejong wanted literacy for all Koreans. After the invention of Hangul, both the literacy rate and the circulation of duplicated literature created by printing presses increased. These developments catalyzed cultural unification among the fragmented parts of the Korean peninsula, which has been terrorized by neighboring peoples throughout its history.

In the 20th century, the Korean people banded together to withstand a half-century of harsh Japanese colonial rule. The Korean War immediately followed and split the country at the 38th parallel in 1953, leaving Korea devastated. South Koreans unified to overcome these challenges and collectively decided to rebuild their nation as an international leader. In only 40 years, South Korea emerged from these struggles to become a technologically advanced, democratic, capitalist society with modern infrastructure supporting new media.

One can witness the superstructure firsthand in busy areas such as Jong-No, Gangnam and Bupyeong Market, where co-ed groups of college friends sit next to older businessmen at small, portable vendor stands drinking post-work soju [3] or eating bowls of bibimbap, talking loudly and showing off their brand-new MP3 phones. Approximately 70% of the population uses 3G handphones [4], Han Ki Chul, director of the Emerging Technologies Research Institute, reported in an interview [5]. “This means that everyone who could have a phone, has one,” he said [6]. This is the primary new medium allowing one to socialize constantly on-line—for instance, using a camera phone to take quick portraits on the fly to post to one’s own on-line photo gallery while still eating dessert with friends.

Also, if any of one’s friends are at home, they more than likely have a 10- to 20-megabit-per-second connection, 10–20 times faster than the United States’ average connection. Korea is often referred to as the worldwide broadband Internet leader. According to a recent report by the National Internet Development Agency of Korea, some 70% of all Koreans over the age of six are on-line, with 87.7% of all users using the extremely fast xDSL connection type [7]. This allows for the rapid sharing of photos, music and video. It also allows people to play massively multi-player on-line games with low latency.

As one walks down an active street—a common experience after midnight—bright neon signs decorate entrances to three different types of baang, or rooms: a norae-baang is literally a “song
room,” or music room, and provides karaoke equipment for groups to enjoy a night of singing; a PC-baang is a public PC lab of sorts, with networked systems allowing teams to play games such as Starcraft, “the Korean national sport”; DVD-baangs are occupied mainly by couples who want to watch movies in private rooms rather than in a public movie theater. Found all over the city, these baangs help connect people through inexpensive mediation.

While the DVD- and norae-baangs provide spaces for more passive entertainment, PC-baangs offer an approximately US$1-per-hour space with the newest computers and games for people to relax with along with food and drinks. The primary late-night activities in PC-baangs include building Cyworld pages and playing networked games. One will witness countless 16- to 33-year-old people networking socially through Cyworld usage [8]. Some 90% of all people in this demographic in South Korea have a Cyworld account [9]. The primary feature of this service is that people create “mini-hompys” (mini-homepages), which are virtual rooms where one’s “mini-me,” an avatar, which incidentally appears only in underwear upon initial sign-up, exists. One is encouraged to purchase items for this “naked” avatar and to decorate a personal room by buying objects using acorns, the Cyworld currency. Even after a night of chatting, drinking and discussing life, the pressure to communicate among a Cyworld “circle of friends,” who might live 1- to 2-hour commutes away from one another, persists across media.

Prior to such a post-midnight PC-baang engagement, many friends must travel home. Those who live nearby go to a PC-baang together and play networked games such as Nexon’s Kart Rider, a massively-multi-player on-line 3D racing car game [10]. As with Cyworld, the basic service is completely free, hence its popularity. Similarly, purchasing premium packages for better karts, clothes and speed-ups sets one apart from the countless other basic avatars.

New media in Seoul stays active all day, facilitating daily life. However, it is only after midnight that Koreans distinctively coalesce into active, close-knit groups to relieve the day’s stress, share their personal lives and in turn strengthen relationships in the media most appropriate for the social moment.

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References and Notes
4. These phones are not the standard bricks seen in the U.S.A. and Europe, but the most advanced and detailed phones on the planet, with digital TV, rotating screens, motorized opening-lids and all manner of interesting gizmodo-gratifying features. See <www.gizmodo.com>.
5. Han Ki Chul, interview, Daejon, South Korea, 28 June 2004.
6. This makes sense, as the other 30% of the population consists of those who cannot use a phone, including the elderly and the very young.

If you are interested in writing an “After Midnight” column on your virtual or physical city, send a 100-word summary of the basic idea to Leonardo at <isast@leonardo.info>.