

Reconnecting Representatives in Two East Asian Democracies

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Abstract Politicians in democracies the world over have begun enthusiastically adopting and adapting web-based methods for communicating with voters and constituents. This article examines one method, i.e. blogging, in the context of legislators in Taiwan and South Korea, two of the most switched-on democracies in the world. Comparing these cases to each other and to the western cases that dominate the literature, the article provides empirical findings on the scale of uptake and the place of blogging amongst other media. It asks who is blogging, what are they blogging about and are they promoting interaction with constituents?

Keywords Political communication · Web 2.0 · Blogging · Taiwan · Korea · Legislator

Introduction

As web-based communication tools have become commonplace in everyday life, so politicians around the world have begun to exploit the opportunities for new forms of communication with constituents and voters. In the context of research on how the internet is changing information flows and political power and broader debates on the implications for democracy and civil society, elected officials' and election candidates' experimentation with new communication tools, especially those associated with web 2.0 technologies, has generated substantial academic interest (for a review, see [21]). This article examines one such practice, i.e. blogging, by representatives in two East Asian democracies, the Republic of China (hereafter Taiwan) and South Korea (hereafter Korea).¹ A weblog, blog for short, is 'a web

¹Throughout the article we use the adjective "Taiwanese" to refer to representatives to the Legislative Yuan. This usage is purely shorthand and does not imply that legislators from the other islands under the jurisdiction of the ROC are representatives of the main island Taiwan, or that representatives from Jinmen and Mazu should be considered Taiwanese. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

page with minimal to no external editing providing online commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources' [9, p. 22]. As such, blogs are often characterized as being flexible, interactive and informal, with the potential advantages that this holds for representatives to communicate with citizens. The emergence of blogging as a mode of communication for representatives has prompted some intriguing claims. In the United Kingdom for instance, blogging has been described as an opportunity for politicians 'to reduce disconnection with the people they represent' [7, p. 9]. Since blogging reportedly differs from more traditional top-down, monologic modes of communication it may thus constitute a 'means for constituents to engage in a conversation with [representatives]' [16, p. 645].

To date, research on political blogging in non-western cases is limited [29, 506]. Published work on blogging has predominantly focused on advanced democracies, despite the high levels of internet connectivity and usage observed in newer democracies in East Asia, particularly South Korea and Taiwan. This is a deficit, not least because the majority of internet scholars have come to emphasize context-specific rather than universal effects of internet usage [21]. Phenomena of interest such as the speed and scale of take-up, patterns of usage and user-level effects are expected to vary according to pre-existing social, cultural and economic conditions. We cannot assume that political blogging has developed in the same ways in Taiwan and Korea as it has in advanced western democracies. Although Taiwan and Korea represent contexts quite distinct from the western cases that dominate the literature, citizens in these two democracies are increasingly evincing the feelings of disconnectedness from their political representatives [35, p. 81; 39] that western scholars argue blogging has the potential to ameliorate [12, p. 22]. The aim of this article is to assess and compare the extent to which representatives in Taiwan's Legislative *Yuan* and Korea's National Assembly have adopted blogging as a means of communication and to explore how they are using the medium.

Political Blogging

Blogs about politics were established in the United States as early as 1997, with the Drudge Report achieving notoriety for the medium by breaking the Monica Lewinsky scandal. As a political communication tool, blogging first achieved prominence with Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 [27]. In contrast to the technologies and usage patterns of earlier versions of the web (predominantly top-down provision of information) Web 2.0 is characterized by community, networks, participation and sharing. Web 2.0 applications include podcasting, wikis, peer-to-peer file sharing, social media and blogging [18]. Compared to maintaining a website, blogging has several advantages that make it an attractive communication tool. Blogs are versatile, easy to maintain and entry barriers are low. As Rosenbloom puts it, 'a blogger needs only a computer, internet access, and an opinion' [32, p. 31]. Blogs allow users to post commentary on their interests, to include a variety of multimedia content, to link to other sites and allow readers to interact via comment and contact functions. They offer a venue for informal public conversations and a formidably candid focus group. In short, blogs

are a ‘useful platform to present experiences, ideas and observations in a personalized manner’ [11, p. 369]. Given the proliferation of free, user-friendly blogging software and the flexibility of the medium, it is not surprising that the blogosphere has expanded rapidly. The blog search engine Technorati counted around 30 million English language blogs in March 2006. A year later this number had tripled [31]. From a low-profile niche activity, blogs have become mainstream, giving rise to a new breed of public intellectual and celebrity in the process. The most popular ‘A-list blogs’ attract astonishingly large audiences and have increasing influence on mainstream media [34,38].

In terms of politicians’ adoption of blogging, research interest has primarily been driven by the potential for blogs to reconnect citizens and representatives. In both advanced democracies and in Taiwan and Korea, mass level survey responses consistently indicate that citizens are feeling increasingly alienated from their elected officials [8,35]. The response of many of officials, driven by self-preservation, is manifest in ‘a relentless desire to reconnect with the public’ [6, p. 273]. On the one hand, candidates go on the campaign trail wearing slacks and windcheaters, ride bicycles in their campaign ads, participate in fun runs and show their compassion by turning out at disaster sites. On the other, mass and new media strategies have been adopted that see representatives take part in reality and entertainment shows on TV and maintain social media accounts. As one element in this process, blogging has received positive attention from a number of western scholars interested in how ‘political blogs contribute to a cultural perception of a civic conversation’ [7, p. 18]. Indeed, there is preliminary evidence that blogs may have a positive role to play in ‘reframing communication’ and ‘enhancing democratic debate’ [13, p. 21].

However, preliminary research findings in western cases also suggest multiple obstacles. First, among representatives blogging appears to be a niche activity, undertaken only by a few politicians, usually those with an interest in technology. For instance, blogging is far from widespread among Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom, with just 12 out of 649 reported to be regular bloggers in 2006 [11]. Second, blogging is an activity that appears, in the majority of cases, to be ephemerally linked to campaign periods [11,24]. Blogs may have a positive role alongside more traditional forms of campaign media, but mobilizing voters is not the way in which most scholars envisage blogs reconnecting citizens and representatives. Third, the most attractive putative feature of blogs is their potential facility for promoting dialogue [16, p. 643]. However, it has been observed that ‘the extent of interactivity in the blogosphere can be easily overstated’ [7, p. 16]. Other research finds that informing, rather than interaction, is the ‘core business of blogging’ [26, p. 102] and that it falls halfway between the information provision characteristic of Web 1.0 and the networked connectivity of Web 2.0 [18]. Fourth, in the contemporary communications environment, where users have almost endless choice of media, it is easy for people to avoid exposure to information that goes against their own preferences. There is a possibility therefore that blogging is a form of narrowcasting, and legislators are essentially ‘preaching to the choir’. As Jackson observes, blogs can have ‘a very narrow and specific role to enhance debate within a separate e-constituency’ [17, p. 97]. In some cases, this has gone beyond an echo-chamber effect to result in extreme polarization [1,5].

What is the situation in Taiwan and Korea? Is blogging by representatives a niche activity, or is the take-up more widespread than in western contexts? How does the scale of blogging compare with other communication tools? Is blogging purely campaign driven, or does it have greater longevity? Who is blogging in Taiwan and Korea? What are legislators blogging about and what function are they using their blogs for? Are legislators' blogs promoting interactivity with users, or is top-down information provision the main *modus operandi*? Is anyone paying attention to these blogs? Addressing these questions is useful from the perspective of exploring the political communications environments in Taiwan and Korea, but also allows comparison with western research.

Background

Two of the most switched-on societies in the world, conditions in Taiwan and Korea appear, at the outset, favourable for representatives to adopt web-based communications. Reflecting high-tech economies increasingly reliant on information technology and consumer electronics, internet penetration and usage rates are outstandingly high. For instance, according to Taiwan's National Communications Commission (NCC) there were 19 million broadband subscriptions in 2009, in a population of 23 million [28]. Furthermore, the Taiwan Network Information Centre (TNIC) estimated in 2008 that 70 per cent of eligible voters used the internet [33]. Korea meanwhile boasts the highest rate of fixed and mobile broadband connectivity in the world [22, p. 2]. Taiwan and Korea are also consistently ranked the two best performing e-democracies in the world. In Taiwan, progress under the framework of the Electronic Government Program enacted by the Executive *Yuan* in April 2001 was especially rapid. By November 2003, 'all government organizations were connected online' and thousands of government agency websites had been created [10]. This progress established Taiwan as the world's top-performing e-democracy in 2002, just ahead of Korea [23, p. 103]. More recently, Korea's e-government index-score placed it first (ahead of Taiwan) out of 198 cases [37]. The respective e-government portals in Taiwan and Korea are cited as examples of global best practice [37].

Taiwanese and Korean parties and politicians have a history of early adoption of online communication tools, particularly as part of their election campaign strategies. In Taiwan for instance, Taipei mayoral candidates were incorporating bulletin board systems (BBS) into their campaign communications as early as December 1994. By the time of the presidential campaign in March 2000, candidates were running sophisticated multimedia content on their websites. As President, in March 2002, CHEN Shuibian held online discussions with 'netizens,' i.e. online citizens [20]. In addition to their user-friendly and highly informative websites, major parties now maintain YouTube channels and social media accounts. In Korea, online campaigning began in earnest with the National Assembly election in April 2000 and is generally believed to have had a strong influence on the outcome of the December 2002 presidential campaign [22, p. 5]. Characterized as the 'internet election' [21], the 2002 campaign featured a liberal underdog candidate, Roh Moon-hyun, who aggressively targeted his online campaign at mobilizing reform minded youth. The

use of online media allowed the progressive Roh campaign to communicate directly with voters without the filter of the more conservative mainstream media [4,30]. However, the major cleavages of political competition in Korea have been mapped on to Korean cyberspace, with competing domains of progressive and conservative elements, which Chang [5] describes as ‘Cyber-Balkanization’.

In both Taiwan and Korea, adoption of online communication tools can be seen as a rational response to several factors. Internet penetration and usage rates are high, leading to widespread familiarity with, and the expectation of, online communications. This is especially pronounced among young voters; an increasingly important segment of the electorate in both cases. Since young voters are less likely than older cohorts to manifest ingrained regionalism or party identification in their vote choice, they are more likely to base their vote choices on what they experience during a campaign (as demonstrated by Roh’s successful mobilization effort in 2002). It would be surprising if legislators taking up blogging were unaware of these factors. The impression of being informal and embracing dialogue with voters, demonstrating that they are ‘with it’, and the potential of blogs to influence media agendas and raise individual profiles are all important, strategic considerations. As Coleman puts it, ‘politicians’ wish to connect has more to do with adaptive self-preservation than any desire to hang out with the plebs’ [6, p. 273].

Such instrumental motivations are understandable when it comes to gaining a potential advantage during a campaign, but what about outside of campaign season? Are legislators similarly motivated to blog when there are less immediate benefits? Although prior research on political blogging has focused predominantly on its role as a campaign tool [19,21], the focus in this article is on the blogging practices of elected representatives during outside of campaign season. While blogging may help familiarize voters with a candidate prior to election the potential of blogs to ‘reconnect with citizens’ is arguably more important outside of campaign periods. This is particularly so in Taiwan, where major reforms prior to the most recent legislative election in 2008 could signal a further distancing between representatives and their constituents. Under the previous Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system, legislators could be elected with very small support bases [3] and their campaigns and constituency service were managed accordingly, i.e. on a small, often personal, scale [25]. However, following redistricting, larger constituencies make it more difficult for legislators to maintain such close connections with their constituents.

Scale of Blogging

To locate legislators’ blogs we collected information from the official lists of each institution and supplemented this using search engines. We began collecting data in 2007 and in the three years since then there has been a substantial turnover of legislator blogs. The contextual and strategic factors outlined above suggest that blogging should be an attractive option for Taiwanese and Korean legislators and this indeed is the case. In Taiwan, 88 of the 126 members (70 per cent) who have served during the Seventh Legislative *Yuan*, i.e. the regular cohort elected in January 2008 plus the 13 subsequently elected in bi-elections, have tried their hand at

blogging. In Korea, 141 of 298 sitting legislators (47 per cent) have had a blog. This discrepancy may indicate differences in preference, with Korean legislators more likely to use the Korean innovation of ‘minihompy.’ Minihompies are webpages that act as a hub for a user’s online tools and networks, sometimes incorporating a blog function, and are increasingly popular among Korean internet users [15, p. 1590]. A further distinction is that Taiwanese legislators are more likely to try blogging, but also more likely to let their blogs become ‘ineffective’, by infrequent updating or abandonment. The scale of blogging in both cases is extraordinarily high compared with western institutions such as the British parliament, where the proportion of blogging representatives is between two and ten per cent [11].

The extent to which blogs can be considered current varies. Some blogs are regularly updated whereas others are not and some have clearly been abandoned. To distinguish between an ‘effective blog’ and ones that are infrequently updated or moribund, we calculated the number of blogs that had been updated with fresh content *within one month* of our data collection. In Taiwan, the average proportion of legislators with an effective blog in the data collection period was between 30 and 50 per cent. At the time of writing, 47 of the 113 current sitting legislators (42 per cent) have an effective blog. For Korea, 118 of 298 (40 per cent) sitting legislators have an effective blog at time of writing.

Because of the electoral systems in place in Taiwan and Korea, a distinction can be made between types of legislator based on electoral district. In the 113-member Legislative *Yuan* in Taiwan, 73 constituency based party-nominated members are elected by First Past The Post (FPTP) in single member districts and 34 ‘at-large’ legislators are elected on a parallel ballot from party lists using the largest remainder method in the nationwide vote. Six further seats are reserved for Taiwanese aborigines in two ‘lowland’ and ‘upland’ districts. In the 299-member Korean National Assembly, 245 members are voted in single-member constituencies, with 54 seats allocated by proportional representation.² This distinction allows us to compare the behaviour of constituency based legislators with that of at-large legislators with a nationwide constituency. There is reason to think that legislators with different constituencies may behave differently in their communication strategies. For instance, research in the United Kingdom suggests that local Members of Parliament (MPs) use their blogs to gain publicity and enhance their media profiles [13, p. 23]. Jackson [17] argues that blogs allow local MPs to transcend local boundaries to become nationally known figures. The findings for Korea support this argument, with constituency based legislators proportionally more likely to have had a blog at one time (48 per cent) than their national counterparts (34 per cent). The opposite was the case in Taiwan, where national legislators were more likely to have a blog (68 per cent) than their constituency counterparts (49 per cent), although these differences are minimal when we consider only the number of effective blogs (see Table 1 below).

Prior research suggests the absence of a discrete profile of a representative who blogs [13]. However, identifying distinct profiles is hindered in western cases by the

² As decreed by the Constitution, the number of seats in the National Assembly is 299. In the 2008 election for the current (18th) session eight seats were left vacant, to be subsequently filled via bi-election in July 2010.

Table 1 Current legislators' use of web-based communication tools (n)

	District	Number	Website	Blog	Effective blog	Social media	Microblog
Taiwan	National	34	4	23	14	10	9
	Constituency	73	22	55	30	25	16
	Aborigine	6	2	4	3	0	0
	Total	113	28 (25%)	82 (73%)	47 (42%)	35 (31%)	25 (22%)
Korea	National	54	54	18	18	1	3
	Constituency	244	244	123	100	119	72
	Total	298	298 (100%)	141 (47%)	118 (40%)	120 (41%)	75 (24%)

small number of blogging representatives. The larger sample sizes witnessed in Taiwan and Korea allow more leverage in this regard and demonstrate, as expected, differences based on age, sex and location. Blogging representatives in Taiwan tend to be an average of three years younger than their non-blogging counterparts. Bloggers are also more likely to be based in major metropolitan areas, although the urban-rural divide has decreased over time as representatives of smaller municipalities and rural constituencies have started to take up blogging. Proportionally, female Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) legislators with a national constituency are the most likely to have a blog. In Korea the age effect is more pronounced, where national constituency bloggers are eight years younger on average than their non-blogging colleagues. Women representatives in both Taiwan and Korea are proportionally more likely than their male colleagues to start *and* maintain a blog.

Finally in this section, we provide an indication of how many people are actually paying attention to these blogs. Since most blogs provide a unique visit or page-view counter, we can estimate the extent to which they are being accessed. In Taiwan, of currently effective blogs, four have attracted hundreds of thousands of visits and 26 are in the tens of thousands. Two blogs exceed 1.5 million page views. In terms of audience size, XU Zhengxiong's blog is an extreme outlier, with an average of 303 thousand *visits* every month since it was launched in 2007. Xu, a sixth term constituency legislator representing Taizhong County and sitting on the Finance Committee, developed a specialist blog dedicated to families with credit and debt problems. This specialist interest is manifest in Xu's policy advocacy in the Legislature and his blog has received over *nine million visits*, giving rise to numerous online communities and extending far beyond Xu's constituency. It is a good example of what Jackson refers to as a 'parallel e-constituency that exists only in the blogosphere' [16, p. 658]. In Korea, one quarter of current blogs count the number of visits in the hundreds of thousands, with a handful in the millions, including the constituency based legislator Chung Dong-young. Chung is a former journalist, long-time high-profile progressive and unsuccessful presidential candidate in 2007. Naturally, the majority of legislators do not share the same level of public awareness and notoriety and there is substantial variation in the popularity of blogs as measured by number of visits. In both Taiwan and Korea some blogs receive a few thousand visits per month. The national/constituency distinction does not have a consistent effect on the number of visits. Instead, popularity seems to be based on

the choice of an especially resonant focal point (like Xu), or an existing high profile (like Chung).

Blogging as a Feature of Other Web-Based Communications

We have reported above that the scale of blogging in Taiwan and Korea is very high compared to western cases such as the United Kingdom. However we do not have any indication of whether this is because blogging as a medium is particularly popular in Taiwan and Korea, or whether it reflects the enthusiastic uptake of web-based tools more generally. Blogs are one of an array of web-based tools available to politicians, ranging from traditional websites or homepages to Web 2.0 applications such as social media accounts (e.g. Facebook) and microblogs (e.g. Twitter).³ In order to put the scale of blogging in the context of other communication tools, we collected data on legislators' other web tools. The distribution of current legislators' web-based tools at time of writing in September 2010 is set out in Table 1 below. This includes the 13 legislators who were elected in bi-elections in Taiwan in spring 2010 and the eight Korean members elected in bi-elections in July 2010. Legislators are separated according to their electoral district, i.e. those with a national constituency chosen by party-list PR, those representing geographically defined constituencies, and in Taiwan, the seats reserved for Lowland and Highland Aborigines. The 'blog' column records the total number of blogs recorded since 2008, including those that have been infrequently updated or can now be considered abandoned. 'Effective blog' on the other hand records only blogs that have been updated with new content within one month of the time of writing. Our measure of 'social media' is restricted to the market leading services, i.e. Facebook and Wretch in Taiwan and Facebook and Cyworld in Korea. The 'microblog' category is similarly limited to market leading services, Twitter and Plurk in Taiwan and Twitter in Korea.

In terms of Web 2.0 applications, blogs are currently the most popular tool in both cases. However, by recording only market leading services it is possible that our measures underestimate the level of take-up of social media and microblogs. In any case, the speed of uptake of social media and microblogging in the past year has been remarkable, with a majority of current users starting their accounts within that time. Indeed, despite the popularity of websites among Korean legislators, we see a shift to Web 2.0 tools and a trend towards legislators embracing multiple online presences, usually with a hub based around a blog or social media site. Taiwanese legislators are especially likely to use their blog as their online hub, linking to social media, video sharing, microblog and other accounts. Korean legislators all maintain a homepage linked from the institutional website, but the level of substantive and interactive material is low and in general we find evidence to support Park and Kluver's claim that 'politicians are gradually moving towards minihompy' [29, p. 514], recorded

³ Microblogs differ from blogs in that users are restricted by microblog services to posting their message in a maximum number of characters, typically 140. This allows users to post short timely messages, often linking to other content by hyperlink, but does not allow the nuances or depth of analysis that blogs allow. Microblog users can choose to follow the feed of other users (who can follow them in turn), so that microblogging has a stronger networked structure.

under ‘social media’ in Table 1 above. Comparing our contemporary data with the earlier findings reported by Park and Kluver [29, p. 507], confirms that the number of Korean legislators using blogs and minhompies has increased markedly in the last three years.

The uptake of blogging, social media and microblogging by legislators in Taiwan and Korea is proportionally similar. In Taiwan the differences between legislator types are negligible, but in Korea, legislators with a national constituency lag far behind their constituency based counterparts. This is particularly pronounced in the case of social media and microblogging, where constituency based legislators are many times more likely to have an account. This supports the argument that constituency based legislators need to work harder in order to increase their profiles, but further research is required on how legislators are using these media before we can say anything more concrete. What we can say is that blogging is currently the most popular Web 2.0 tool for Taiwanese and Korean legislators. Social media and microblogging are proliferating rapidly, but at present it seems that they are adding an additional layer to legislators’ online communications rather than replacing blogs.

Is Blogging Solely Campaign Driven?

If the potential benefits of blogging are to be felt over the long term, it is important that blogs are not linked ephemerally to campaign periods. We have reported above that, at time of writing in autumn 2010, around 40 per cent of Taiwanese and Korean legislators have an effective blog. That is, at mid-point in the legislative electoral cycle in both cases, around 40 per cent of legislators are blogging. As a *prima facie* observation, it would appear that blogging is not solely driven by campaign behaviour. One way to examine this issue more closely is to identify when legislators began their blogs. We distinguish between three types of blogging legislators, based on when they began blogging. The ‘pioneers’ began one year before the most recent legislative elections. ‘Opportunists’ began blogging in the 12 months preceding the election. ‘Latecomers’ started their blogs at some point after the last legislative election; early in 2008 in both cases. The sample we use is all legislators originally elected to the institutions in January 2008 in Taiwan and April 2008 in Korea, i.e. we exclude legislators who were elected (in both cases) in bi-elections in 2010.

The earliest blogs in both Taiwan and Korea were established in spring 2004 and many bloggers have posted several hundred times. The distribution of legislators divided by the time they began blogging is set out in Table 2 below. In Taiwan, one third of blogging legislators (33 per cent) were pioneers, while nearly half (46 per cent) were opportunists. All four Aborigine bloggers were latecomers. In Korea, there were more pioneers (37 per cent), and all of them sat in the previous legislature. A lower proportion of blogging legislators in Korea were opportunists (34 per cent). All of the opportunists and latecomers in Korea were first-time legislators. Dividing by legislator type, nearly two thirds of the group of 18 at-large blogging legislators in Taiwan were pioneers, starting more than a year ahead of the election. Five were latecomers who did not start their blogs until after the election and just two were opportunists. Of these 18 blogs, 13 are still current.

Table 2 Take up by time period (n)

	District	Pioneers	Opportunists	Latecomers
Taiwan	National	14	3	7
	Constituency	13	34	6
	Total	27 (33%)	37 (46%)	17 (21%)
Korea	National	2	3	12
	Constituency	47	44	25
	Total	49 (37%)	45 (34%)	39 (29%)

By contrast, constituency based legislators appears to have had greater instrumental motivations, with 70 per cent starting their blogs in the run up to the election. Additional data collection shows that Taiwanese constituency based legislators were also much more likely to start a blog during electoral contests where their competitors had one. Posting activity was more intense during the election period for the majority of constituency based bloggers; but not their national constituency counterparts for whom it declined. In some cases, constituency based legislators increased their blogging activity by a factor of twenty times during campaign season. This appears indicative of strategic considerations, but cannot explain why so many blogs survive beyond the campaign. In Korea, national legislators were less pioneering than in Taiwan or their constituency based colleagues. As in Taiwan, our additional data collection reveals that Korean opportunists were more likely to start a blog if their election opponent also had one. Strategic considerations may be obvious in this instance, but less so in the case of the latecomers (29 per cent of all Korean bloggers). Further work is required to assess whether these decisions are based on a desire to connect with citizens following election, or other strategic considerations.

What are Legislators Blogging About?

In this and the following section, we use a dual coding scheme to record the content and the function of legislators' blogs. First, blog posts were coded according to four types of substantive content; local issues, national issues, international issues, and personal non-political content [13, p. 32]. The unit of coding is the blog post itself, rather than disaggregating posts into individual words and phrases. To counter the issue of the changing number of effective blogs, we collected data during four week-long periods between March 2008 and December 2009. The sample at each point in time included all effective blogs at that time, i.e. blogs that had been updated with new content within one month. Data was generated by manual content analysis of all of the blog posts collected during the timeframe. The proportional distribution of blog posts on our four dimensions is shown in Table 3 below. Reporting the proportion of posts controls for the changing number of effective blogs and allows us to make comparisons between the two cases and the two types of legislator. During the data collection

Table 3 Proportional distribution of Blog content (%)

	District	Local	National	International	Personal	Posts (n)
Taiwan	National	3	89	6	2	67
	Constituency	35	59	3	3	198
Korea	National	2	56	14	28	173
	Constituency	11	38	14	37	1318

period no aborigine representatives in Taiwan had an effective blog and so are excluded from the following table.

The first thing to notice is that Korean legislators are posting substantially more content than their counterparts in Taiwan, after controlling for the higher number of Korean bloggers. One potential explanation for this finding is that Korean legislators appear to treat their blogs as a means for personal expression, much more so than legislators in Taiwan. Consider that Taiwanese legislators' blogs contain 2–3 per cent of 'personal' content, whereas their Korean counterparts' blogs contain between 28 (national) and 37 per cent (constituency) of posts where the content was predominantly personal. If Korean legislators are treating their blogs in a more personal way, like an online journal that characterizes a large proportion of blogs generally, it is understandable that they will update their blogs more often. Taiwanese legislators are more likely to post on political issues and, with a few exceptions, avoid making personal statements. This contrasts with legislators in both Korea and the United Kingdom, who use 'personal and domestically-contextualized accounts' to appear down-to-earth and accessible [7, p. 10]. In Taiwan, however, there are obvious age and gender distinctions, with younger, particularly women legislators, using more engaging designs and personal language.

Not surprisingly, national legislators in both cases focus more on national issues, particularly in Taiwan, where post content is dominated by national political issues. Constituency based legislators in Taiwan are also more likely to focus on national issues than their Korean counterparts. The big surprise is that the lowest proportion of post content for Korean constituency based legislators, was local issues. By contrast, Taiwanese constituency based legislators focus on local issues in more than one third of their posts. Furthermore, although these data are not included in Table 3, additional data collection reveals that concentration on local issues increases to 80 per cent of total content during the official campaign period. Again, there is substantial variation between individual legislators. Some constituency based legislators focused entirely on local issues. Others, such as LIN Yishi and GUAN Biling, barely addressed local issues, which can be explained by Lin's role as Kuomintang (KMT) Whip and Guan's role as the Director of the DPP's Policy Centre.

What Functions Do Blogs Serve?

In order to capture the purpose of each blog post, the same sample of blogs was re-coded to identify five different functions [13]. The first, 'solve,' refers to posts that

introduced substantive problems with the explicit intention of raising and discussing potential solutions with constituents. ‘Explain’ refers to explaining policy positions or the actions of the individual or her party. ‘Promote’ records posts that publicize activities, emphasize achievements or refer to the legislator’s own events. ‘Criticize’ is a measure of posts where the main purpose was to criticize an opponent or the opposing party. Finally, ‘inform,’ records posts where the purpose was simply to provide information, usually contextual or background information about an issue or event. Table 4 shows the proportional distribution of post functions.

There are several substantial and significant differences between Korean and Taiwanese legislators’ blogs, although explaining a position is the major function for both legislator types in both cases. Explaining a position or action most often involved posts along the lines of ‘I support this position because...’ Although one can sometimes detect a defensive attitude (and spin) in such posts, it is encouraging that legislators are using the blog medium to explain to their constituents why they support particular policies or ideological positions. Two major differences between Taiwanese and Korean legislators are in terms of problem solving and criticism. For Korean legislators, especially constituency based ones, raising problems with the express intention of stimulating debate on how to solve them, is a major part of their blog content. Problem solving is much less prominent for Taiwanese legislators, who are much more likely to use their blogs to criticize their opponents. Criticism was a particularly prominent function of national legislators’ blogs, with nearly one quarter (23 per cent) of all posts. By contrast, explicit criticism of opponents is negligible in the Korean blogs. This is not to say that Korean legislators do not criticize their opponents, but unlike Taiwanese, they rarely do so in their blogs.

How Interactive are Representatives’ Blogs?

We have argued above that the most attractive feature of the blog medium is its potential for promoting dialogue. One way of exploring the level of interactivity in blogs is to look at the comments left by visitors to each blog. Drawing on Hargittai et al. [14] the comments generated by every blog post in the sample were coded on six dimensions. ‘Agree’ and ‘Disagree’ record comments indicating support or discord on the substance of a post. ‘Redirect’ records comments that provided new information or redirected the conversation. ‘Debate’ refers to horizontal debate between people making comments. Finally, ‘Question’ records instances of commenters asking a legislator a question and an off-topic category. The distribution

Table 4 Proportional distribution of Blog functions (%)

	District	Problem solving	Explain position	Promote activities	Criticize opponent	Provide information
Taiwan	National	6	31	11	23	29
	Constituency	7	47	9	8	29
Korea	National	22	54	15	0	9
	Constituency	34	36	9	1	20

of comments is set out in Table 5. Although not shown in Table 5, instances of legislators responding to comments were also recorded.

Just as blogs vary in the size of their audience, so the number of comments also varies: and naturally there is a strong correlation between the two. Francoli and Ward found similar variation in the blogs of MPs in the United Kingdom [13, p. 31]. It is no surprise that well known legislators with established blogs posting on ‘controversial’ topics attracted the most interest. An obvious example from Taiwan is the post in which legislator YAN Qingbiao addressed being sentenced to prison for firearms possession, which generated several hundred comments. Although many comments simply celebrated his demise or pledged allegiance to him, there was also serious discussion about what Yan’s conviction meant for the quality of representation and democracy in Taiwan. By contrast many posts failed to stimulate any comments, even on blogs with substantial traffic. This suggests either that post content failed to resonate, or that users are content to browse for information without commenting.

The idea that web users can easily avoid cognitive dissonance by seeking out confirmatory information for existing beliefs has some support in our data. A majority of comments voiced agreement with the content of the blog post, suggesting that legislators are using their blogs to narrowcast their ideas to existing supporters. Redirecting the conversation by extending the original argument or providing new information was a common feature of comments in Taiwanese blogs. These comments often took the form of describing personal experiences and cited or linked to other sources. In some cases these shared experiences led to constructive discussions between users, although in most cases, horizontal debate between readers (‘debate’) was less constructive.

In Korea the number of comments was uniformly low, averaging less than one comment per post. In the majority of cases, Korean blog posts failed to generate any responses at all. These data do not indicate whether this is a feature of political or blogging behaviour. Korean legislators also made no effort to reply to those who did make comments. The extent to which Taiwanese legislators replied to comments was much higher, particularly among constituency based legislators, many of whom made a consistent effort to answer questions and to converse with visitors to their blogs. Taiwanese blog users were also likely to ask direct questions, often taking the form of asking a legislator’s opinion about something that had happened to the person commenting or something they had witnessed. Sometimes there was an implied desire for restitution, while other questioners made direct pleas for a legislator to intervene in their troubles. No such entreaties were present in the Korean blogs.

Table 5 Distribution of comments (n)

	District	Agree	Disagree	Redirect	Debate	Question	Total
Taiwan	National	27	20	21	2	5	75
	Constituency	153	67	45	25	14	379
Korea	National	3	0	0	1	0	4
	Constituency	127	1	3	63	0	194

Conclusion

Recent research in advanced western democracies consistently shows that ‘representative institutions have been looking increasingly distant from and irrelevant to citizens’ [13, p. 28]. It is suggested that one contributing factor to this malaise is a ‘crisis of public communication’ [2], in which there is an absence of direct and interactive communication between representatives and citizens. Given this context, some western scholars have been attracted to the potential of new communication tools like blogging to re-establish a connection between constituents and their elected representatives. However, little research to date has focused on democracies in East Asia, despite the similarly declining health of public attitudes and the high levels of internet penetration and usage in tech-based economies and tech-savvy societies. Comparing the practice of blogging among legislators in Taiwan and Korea, this article demonstrates that these cases should not be neglected, if only for the sheer scale of the phenomenon, which is substantially more common than in the United Kingdom, Canada or Australia [13,36].

Compared to western institutions, the scale, consistency of use and reach of blogs in Taiwan and Korea are impressive. Blogging is not solely driven by a concern for gaining advantages during election campaigns. Numerous blogs have attracted large audiences: some counted in millions of visits. The quality of information being made to blog users is generally high, with legislators addressing important substantive issues in a frank and unmediated way. These are encouraging findings, but the level of interactive communication appears to be quite low. Dialogue is virtually absent in the Korean legislators’ blogs. In Taiwan dialogue is happening, both vertically and horizontally, but many conversations fail to get off the ground and dialogue between citizen users often deteriorates into name calling. Although our data do not reveal who is accessing the blogs, the observation that a majority of comments voice agreement suggests that existing supporters constitute the majority of users engaging interactively, even if we cannot be sure about the wider ‘reading only’ audience. Blogs and other tools that hold the promise of improving communication between citizens and officials are clearly worthy of further investigation, particularly as legislators are increasingly adopting social media and microblogging, with their even more interactive and networked formats.

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