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A Prospect of the Daily life in Information-oriented Society : What are the Promises and Threats for Korean?

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1. Introduction

With advances in information and telecommunication technology, PCs and communications systems are increasingly ubiquitous - a sign that Korea is marching into an information-based society. Information refers to the knowledge that is communicated and utilized by people. In this sense, information has played a pivotal role in human life since the beginning of the times. Today's world is dubbed "information-oriented society" which means that information and telecommunication technology dominates all the possible aspects of our daily life.

With the advent of information-oriented society, we are experiencing enormous changes in buying patterns, family structure, gender roles, ways to feed, clothe and shelter ourselves as well as in social network, economic system and educational environment. These changes are followed by transformations in our value systems at all levels of individual, family or community.

Against this backdrop, views split on the implications of such changes for our personal or family life. Skeptics say that there is nothing we can do to alter the course of change but to accept is as reality. Optimists argue that we can actively participate and make best of it. Views on the future are usually determined by ideology, social status, race, culture and other factors.

This paper is not intended to propose a certain view with respect to picturing our future life in the context of the ongoing information revolution. Rather this paper will focus on answering a few questions capturing very important aspects of the changes that we see under our nose from various angles. Those questions include : With the information revolution in process, what are we

experiencing? ; What are the major promises and threats of the changes? ; What is our future going to be like? ; What can we do to overcome such threats in order to shape the future to our benefit?

2. Transformation of Daily Life

The speed at which Korea is transforming into an information-based society is breathtaking. Korea has relatively well established telecommunication network compared to other developing nations. It was in the late 19 century when the telephone was first introduced in Korea. Since then, Korea's telecom industry has grown rapidly, recording one of the highest growth rates across the world.

The telephone arrived on Korea's soil in 1895 when King Sunjong, the last king of Chosun Dynasty was in throne. It was then called "talking device" and installed at the Palace and at the tomb of King Kojong, Sujong's father and used for remote greetings and mourning in every morning and evening. This is an indication that telecommunication systems in Korea already began to replace transportation means. Since thirteen citizens subscribed to the telephone service for the first time in 1902, subscription has increased dramatically to reach 19.32 million by last year's end.

Along with drastic increase in telephone use, the number of PC users has risen from 700,000 in 1989 to 6 million in 1996. The use of cellular phones and pagers that revolutionized our way of life exploded in just 10 years after they were first introduced into the Korean market. The number of cellular phones and pagers in use grew 454 times and 333 times to 3.18 million and 12.69 million from 7,000 and 38,000, respectively. (source : Chung Ang Daily, April 22, 1997)

The penetration of digital-based services such as digital cellular phone, digital cordless phone, pager, mobile network, LAN is expected to grow fast this year. The transition from analogue to digital is one of the major forces in the telecom industry. Increased use of the internet which is another major force, will give a big boost to the network market.

What is noteworthy is explosive growth in use of on-line services. The number of on-line service users rose to 1.7 million

last year from 1995's 700,000 and is expected to reach 3 million by the year's end. So far, some 1,000 public database systems have been built in Korea and the figure is growing by more than 30% each year.

All of these numbers testifies that Korea is marching into an information-based society or the era of multimedia which can be characterized by four features.

First, decentralization. In the early stages of information revolution, of concerns about a centralized control over society were loudly voiced. Given the vertical structure of countless terminals being connected to mainframe computers in those days, such concerns were not groundless. Some of the voices are still very strong. However, the vertical structure has given its way to a more horizontal, decentralized structure of a number of high-powered PCs forming networks. The era of network PC enables people to communicate freely and thus to form more democratic relationships with each other.

Second, interactivity. When information revolution was in the incipient stage, gathering, processing and delivering text-type information was an immediate task. At the times, different types of information such as text, voice, image were carried out by separate media. But, the second stage of the revolution merged all the separate media into one to provide integrated multimedia services. In the multimedia age, we witness the convergence of text to hypertext, and the emergence of cyberspace where people can enjoy virtually unlimited access to all kinds of audio/visual information. With PCs, TVs and phones being integrated into one electronic device, it is easier to create, process and distribute information. Multimedia are two-way avenue where information users can influence the flow of information. In the multimedia age how to deliver a message is less important than how to create a message.

Third, duality. Information is public goods in its nature, but can become a comodity with a price tag, sold and bought just like other products in the capitalist market. Information in general exchanged through communication among people with no payment. But, this is not the case when some people claim ownership of certain information and control free exchange of such information though communication. This is especially true when information

becomes a product that can be traded in the market.

Fourth, openness. The boundaries dividing industries, social sectors and nations that were clear and legally protected in the industrial age are disappearing these days as we are able to exchange information freely with anyone around the world anytime we want. Information revolution contributed greatly to destroying the national borders, enabling the free movement of goods, resources, currencies and people. Lines that divide each academic discipline is blurring.

Information revolution is fundamentally changing the way we live our lives and produces positive effects but sometimes negative ones.

3. Foreseeing the Daily Life : Promises and Threats

According to a delphi survey conducted in Korea, most of the polled believed that the information revolution would bring about positive effects to women. As telecommuting and flexible-time work system are increasingly popular, women are enjoying greater opportunities to work. The use of PCs and home automation is relieving housewives of the burden of house chores. By the time women account for the half of work force, gender discrimination will have gradually fade out. No matter how slow it occurs, women will be active in the male-dominant areas with the wage gap between men and women narrowing. This will accompany the shift of power in the workplace and subsequently and more importantly at home. Men will be forced to share the responsibility of housekeeping and child-raising that women entirely took charge of in the past. For example, the mother will no longer be the one who must take her child to a doctor when the child gets sick. In the same vein, the mother, in case of a divorce, will lose her privilege in custody trial.

More and more people are expected to work home due to technological advances, increased use of telecommunications, shrinking office space resulting from restructuring trends and worsening traffic congestion in major cities. However, the growing popularity of telecommuting is a mixed blessing. Telecommuting

allows parents to have more time with their children, cements the family bond and enhances time management. On the other hand, it creates confusion of work, isolates people and unstabilizes the worker status by weakening labor unions.

The increased availability of various information will also prompt people to start up their own businesses. All these changes are expected to be obvious in the next decade.

In today's competitive world, swiftness in securing information is vital to the management at all levels, individual, business or nation. But, as information generates more power, the gap between information-haves and have-nots is expected to get wider. Disparity in information distribution among individuals, groups or nations has surfaced as a critical problem leading to social injustice. A gap exists between generations, between men and womens, between social groups and between countries.

The young generation is familiar with the computer language, less controled by social ethics and principles, enjoys surfing through the cyberspace and accepts it as the reality whereas the older generation regards it unrealistic. The old generation sees things in an orderly and linear manner which is the hallmark of the printing media era while the way of thinking for the younger generation living in the multimedia era is multi-faceted and more complex. Such gap hinders free communication between generations and causes misunderstandings and conflicts.

Futurists say that the industrial age where men's muscles were important is over and the age of information to be dominated by women's delicacy is approching. However, statistics tells us that we are far away from that. Even though the number of women workers is on a steady increase, computers and internet users are predominantly men. According to a survey, women take up a mere 20% of those using three major online services(Hitel, Chollian, Nownuri) in Korea.

The gap between developed and developing nations in information sharing was the theme for the "Conference for Information society and development" held in South Africa in June, 1996. Indeed more than two thirds of the world-wide internet users are concentrated in North America and other developed nations. If things go as they stand now, the gap between

industrialized and developing nations will widen further. In addition as English became an official language in telecommunication, the American culture will spread throughout the world and may replace traditions and cultures of other countries.

The information revolution is changing the way we learn. In Korea, schools are one of the last to adopt new information technology. If schools are found to be incapable of keeping abreast with the rapidly changing environment, students and parents will lose their confidence in schools. In the U.S., as distrust for formal schooling deepens with rapid increase in teleeducation, some 1 million children, according to an estimate by HSLDF(The Home School Legal Defense Fund), stay home and study instead of going to school.

Tele-education helps materializing life-time learning. Salaried workers or housewives can hardly find time out to attend a course. Even if they do, school fees are often too expensive and the severe traffic jam discourages them still further. For these people, online reeducation program is a good alternative. Some 40 universities across the world including Carnegie Mellon, Keio University and London School of Economics offer greater opportunities to receive advanced degrees by opening online graduate schools.

Information revolution is also changing the way we buy commodities or services. Shopping will be quick and more convenient. In fact, Korea's retail industry was the first to transform itself to adapt to the new wave of globalization. As the retail market was opened to foreign competition in 1996, a number of multinational retailers have advanced into the Korean market and alternative retail sales such as catalogue sales, multi-level sales and cyber market are becoming more widespread. For example, Lotte Department Store, the Korea's largest, tries the preparation work for opening a cybermarket carrying 400,000 items within this year. Shinsegae Department Store, one of the largest, has set up a homepage in January. Sales in cyber market is growing at an annual rate of 30% in Korea. With the number of cyber shoppers expected to rise, the sight of housewives haggling for discount with shopkeepers at conventional markets will

become the story of yesterday.

Despite all the advantages that information revolution provides, it is not without problems. Among the problems is the adverse effects of free flow of indecent materials in cyberspace. Those materials stimulate sexual curiosity in a negative way and contribute to boosting the sex industry, thus degrading women's status. The use of internet increases the chances for people to meet the opposite sex in cyberspace. Critics say that this will lead to premature relationships at younger age and the proliferation of contract marriage based on convenience.

In the information age, we tend to question the value systems that we have long held or fall into relativism as we are exposed to all kinds of rules and norms. But, we need to be able to tell the absolute and unchangeable values from transient ones. Even in the information age, the final decision must be made by ourselves as humans based on the absolute values. But, as we increasingly depend on computers and are flooded with information, we easily yield to the power of computers and have little chances to make our own decisions based on our value system. Moreover, as time goes, contacts between people will decrease, thus making people feel more isolated and alienated.

Lewis Mumford argued that technological advances are not made of machines only but of machines, technologies to operate those machines, and social structure that enables the operation. In this sense, all technologies take on political aspects. In other words, technologies are not value-neutral and can benefit or harm the society depending on who use the technologies for what purpose. Technologies serve various purposes : to enhance efficiency, to bring benefits in production, sales and distribution, to raise profits and to win a war. They often produce an inflexible, rigid social structure which is hard to understand, modify or control.

Moreover, the knowledge and view that people have on the state-of-the-art technologies is dangerously limited. Those who produce and distribute technologies show only the bright side. But, what is important is to have a clear view on the advantages and disadvantages brought about by new technologies. Technologies in telecommunication must be used not only to bring

personal benefits but to contribute to enhancing economic justice, cooperation, understanding, participation, sense of responsibility and ecological balance.

4. Shaping for the future

The promises and threats that information revolution brings about must be used as the yardstick by which we charter our future course. While 24 hour communication and exchange of information is available on the internet, the participation of Korean Home Economist is minimal and in the embryonic stage.

First of all, efforts must be made to strengthen our ability to adapt to the changes of the times. This means acquiring knowledge on how to use sophisticated telecommunications technology and using it to enhance the quality and efficiency of education and research. The use of information technology will reactivate education and research efforts and help students obtain skills needed in information society.

Amid the diversity of cultures, we must have a clear sense of identity and pride in our own culture, take interest in maintaining the absolute values that we all cherished for long and use them to recover our dignity as humans. Further, our role should be viewed as sharing knowledge not simply delivering it. As the scope of learning and research is expanding beyond time and space, the lines between disciplines are blurring and academic exchanges between countries will be more active.

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