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Society for Risk Analysis

Protests of South Korean Railway Project Fueled by Internet Comments

High levels of Internet connectivity in South Korea underlie amplified public attention to ecological risks of a major new high-speed railway tunnel project forcing it onto the national agenda.

Washington DC – An analysis of comments posted to Korean message boards in response to online articles on a controversial new high-speed railway tunnel project shows how high levels of Internet connectivity can amplify the perception of risks and spark political behavior. As a communication medium, the Internet disseminates information much more rapidly than traditional media, with the ripple effect spreading swiftly across regions and sectors. This particular occurrence of socially amplified risk resulted in several hunger strikes and other political opposition to the tunnel construction and nearly crippled the project, ultimately requiring the intervention of national political leaders and the court system.

The study, “Social Amplification of Risk in the Internet Environment,” was conducted by Ik Jae Chung of Seoul National University of Science and Technology. Dr. Chung is a research associate professor in the department of public administration and policy at Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, State University of New York. The research was supported by the Korea Research Foundation funded by the Korean government. The article is included in the December issue of the journal *Risk Analysis*, published by the Society for Risk Analysis.

The study focused on the “interactive attention” people paid to a risk, which was measured by their comments to online newspaper articles and their replies to messages posted on public and nonprofit organization websites. More than 90 percent of Koreans are connected to the wireless Internet in South Korea, which is the highest level worldwide.

The author examined “social stations,” such as environmental groups and other organizations that opposed the tunnel construction, for their impacts on public interactive attention. Social stations functioned as hubs of information that informed the public of the ecological risks tunnel construction would pose to wildlife and endangered species such as salamanders on Mt. Cheoseong. The researchers reviewed 158 online articles and the attached comments, and detected a pattern of increasing intensity throughout the observation period. The posted articles and response comments served to amplify public concerns, evidenced in one case by a nun who

went on several hunger strikes. The public outcry delayed tunnel construction by over a year, until the courts ruled that the species identified would not be adversely affected.

According to Chung, “The Internet, in isolation, cannot account for all the processes of risk amplification. Traditional media such as newspapers, TV and radio also worked to intensify public concern for the issue. Without the Internet, however, the tunnel construction as a local issue could not have developed to a national agenda within such a short period.” The article notes that “without the Internet, it was not easy for the risk issue to be recognized by the public because newspaper coverage given to the tunnel construction was minimal during most of the period studied. . . the final destination of amplified attention was the President’s Office, the highest level of political decision-making.”

In addition, the research revealed significant religious undertones in communications about risk-related issues. “Religious interpretations of endangered ecosystems strengthened the seriousness of the risk. The moralization of the risk and the sanctification of nature intensified public concern for the issue.”

Because more countries are increasing their Internet connectivity, the author encourages additional research studies on risk amplification. He underscores the view that “democratization of information does not necessarily create great concordance between the cultural and technical assessment of risk. The Internet is vulnerable to a small number of activists with loud voices targeting special interests.”

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Note to editors: The complete study is available upon request from Steve Gibb or here: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2011.01623.x/full>