

Chapter VI

Socio–Cultural Interpretations to the Diffusion and Use of Broadband Services in a Korean Digital Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to ascertain the causes of the rapid growth of broadband services in the context of the broader socio-cultural elements. It recognizes technology as a socio-cultural product which has historically been constituted by certain forms of knowledge and social practice, so this chapter explores cultural elements contributing to the diffusion of broadband services in the context of the cultural environment in Korea. Further, this chapter discusses the significant role of the people, as users, in the process of the rapid diffusion and growth of broadband services. In particular, it emphasizes the way in which the 1997 economic crisis, as one of the most significant socio-cultural turning points in modern Korean history, has influenced the deployment of broadband services as high-speed Internet connections have developed since 1997.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread availability of broadband services (high-speed Internet) throughout the world significantly influences people in their life. Broadband services have made it easier to download digital music and movies, and the wide penetration of broadband services has enabled customers to engage in online stock transactions and online games. Many schools, from elementary to universities, in various countries are also connected to broadband

services and utilize information technology (IT) for education, while Internet broadcasters have rapidly become popular.

A wide range of developed countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom to developing countries in the Third World, have initiated modern telecommunications networks that support broadband access, providing high-speed access and always-on connections to both homes and offices, to develop the social and technical landscape of cyberspace (Han, 2003; Ishii, 2003; Lee & Lee, 2003; Jin, 2007). Korea is among the

leading performers in broadband (Lee, Oh, & Shim, 2005). As of January 2006, about 77% of Korean households were connected to broadband services, which is one of the highest throughout the world (MIC, 2006).

Consequently, Korea has become the world's best laboratory for broadband services—and a place to look to for answers on how the Internet business may evolve (Taylor, 2006). Much scholarly analysis and discourse (Yun, Lee, & Lim, 2002; Lee, O'Keefe, & Yun, 2003; Reynolds & Sacks, 2003; Choudrie & Lee, 2004; Lau, Kim, & Atkin, 2005; Lee et al., 2005; Jin, 2005) has focused on the roles of the government and competition among telecommunications companies in developing broadband services in Korea. They emphasize several factors contributing to the rapid growth of broadband services caused by the deregulation and competition policies in the telecommunications sector, such as a variety of promotion policies to boost Internet use and the strategies of broadband Internet providers. Previous studies, however, have not paid much attention to socio-cultural factors, which would be one of the most important contributing factors given that people are the major users of broadband services. Although a few papers examine cultural factors that contribute to broadband services, their discussions are neither comprehensive, nor informative.¹

Unlike these preceding studies, this chapter attempts to ascertain the causes of the rapid growth of broadband services in the context of the broader socio-cultural elements. It recognizes technology as a socio-cultural product which has historically been constituted by certain forms of knowledge and social practice, so this chapter explores cultural elements contributing to the diffusion of broadband services in the context of the cultural environment in Korea. Further, it discusses the significant role of the people, as users, in the process of the rapid diffusion and growth of broadband services. In particular, it emphasizes the way in which the 1997 economic crisis, as one of the most significant socio-cultural turning points in modern Korean history, has influenced the deployment of broadband services, as high-speed Internet connections have developed since 1997.

TECHNOLOGY AS CULTURAL FORMS

It is generally recognized that technologies are primarily neutral because they operate essentially under the same norm of efficiency in all situations. Many users of technology argue that technology is essentially amoral and an entity devoid of values (Rescher, 1969; Mesthene, 1970). This instrumental theory, the dominant view of modern governments and the policy sciences on which they depend, argues that “if people use technology for destruction or pollution, as in the case of nuclear weapons and chemical pollution, it should not be blamed on technology, but on its misuse by politicians, the military, big business and others” (Pacey, 1983, p. 2).

For many scholars, however, technology is not simply a means to an end, but has become an environment and a way of life; this is its substantive impact (Borgmann, 1984). This substantive theory of technology holds that technology is not neutral, but has a substantive value bias. Substantive theory, best known through the writings of Jacques Ellul, Arnold Pacey, and Martin Heidegger, claims that technology constitutes a new type of cultural system that restructures the entire social world as an object of control. Substantive theory explicates cultural aspects of technology, such as values, ideas, and the creative activity of technology (Feenberg, 1991). This type of cultural system is characterized by an expansive dynamic which ultimately mediates every pre-technological enclave and shapes the whole of social life.

Among these, Ellul (1964) pointed out that we have to examine technology through its socio-cultural aspects: “We should consider the effect of technique on social relationships, political structures, and economic phenomena.” Technology is not aloof from the social realm; on the contrary, it is an integral part of the social (Webster, 2002). Pacey (1983, pp. 4-6) also discussed how those who write about the social relations and social control of technology should be made aware of the cultural aspects as well as the organizational and technological aspects.

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