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## Twitter in Place

### Examining Seoul's Gwanghwamun Plaza through Social Media Activism

*Samuel Gerald Collins*

#### Abstract

*In Korea, social networking sites are overwhelmingly utilized through smart phones; people tweet or update Facebook with their mobile devices. Like any social networking site, this means that people are making (and remaking) connections with each other, but it also means that people are connecting in complex ways to place. Even if geo-location is disabled, these social media still have this embodied dimension; they're not just tweets, but tweets in a particular space and time. In Seoul, embodied practices of social media infuse spaces with diverse and networked meaning that interact (however weakly) with existing spatial systems. In this essay, I explore the diverse meaning of public space in Seoul through an analysis of Twitter traffic surrounding enormous protests in 2016 at Gwanghwamun Plaza calling for the resignation of President Park Geun-hye. People who protested against the President in Gwanghwamun Plaza were not only calling for her resignation, but they are also making strong claims to space that re-define the heterogeneous site as a space of protest. At the same time, they are not the only groups making claims on the plaza: conservative groups, merchants, commuters, tourists and various bots tweet other meanings through their interactions with the protest site, and these, too, add to the networked representation of Gwanghwamun Plaza. Ultimately, the paper suggests a theory of social media in urban settings which emphasizes complex interactions of space, representation, networked action, absence and presence.*



Figure 1: The beginning of a protest against Park Geun-hye. Image from Wikimedia.

## Introduction

In South Korea, the impeachment and removal of former President Park Geun-hye in early 2017 represents the triumph of years of activism, beginning with protests in the wake of the Sewol ship disaster in April of 2014 – an accident off of the southwest coast of South Korea that killed hundreds of students from a high school in a suburb of Seoul, and that led to charges of government complicity and corruption. Like other instances of activism, the campaign to remove Park Geun-hye – while national – was also very much a local event, centred in Seoul. Shortly after the 2014 accident, the bereaved families and their supporters started staging sit-ins in Gwanghwamun Plaza in the centre of old Seoul and, as the weeks went on, the city erected tents to house the protestors. As weeks turned to months, Sewol protestors joined others in a chorus against the Park Geun-hye government, protests that would frequently culminate in dramatic, candlelight vigils along Sejong Avenue (*Sejong-daeno*).



Figure 2: Sewol ship disaster protest encampment. Photo by author.

But the occupation and frequent protests were also huge media events, framed by countless streams of commentary, photos and reporting through multiple platforms of social media, in a way that has become normative in activism: protests are planned on social media, reported on through social media, and reflected on through social media. That is, a physical protest is enacted against the scaffolding of social media platforms, in a way that became famous in Arab Spring protests in 2011 and in the Occupy Movement, although South Korean activists had largely anticipated this in the 2008 protests against then-President Lee Myung-bak and US beef imports (Lee, Kim and Wainwright 2010). While many have been less than sanguine about the impact of social media on organizing and activism, it is no longer possible to bring aggregations of people and groups together in a space

of protest without these media platforms (Campbell 2017). With the protests against Park Geun-hye, we see the next stage of development of social media-informed activism. Here, activists were able to organize through South Korea's ubiquitous internet and its near-universal adoption of smartphones along multiple localities nationally and even internationally. While the struggle to remove Park from office echoes earlier struggles both in Korea and elsewhere, they also anticipate an activist future where "physical" and "virtual" emerge as a seamless, activist interface that unites people, idea and social action across multiple sites.



Figure 3: A candlelight protest against government policies regarding the victims of the Sewol ship disaster. Photo by author.

In the age of social media, the social media campaigns and the physical occupations of urban spaces cannot be separated: they are both part of the "networking" logic of contemporary activism (Juris 2008). But while the interpenetration of social media and urban space in contemporary activism seems like a truism, the ways one maps one to the other is less clear. Clearly, social media *represents* urban space. More than this, it may help in the *occupation* of urban spaces. But what are those representations? How do social media users position themselves in urban spaces? And what is the relationship of one to the other? It is, perhaps, obvious that activists "occupied" Zucotti Park during Occupy Wall Street (OWS), and scholarship has explored the meanings of space during OWS and other movements (Hammond 2013). But what does "occupy" mean in a world of social media that renders location more ambiguous? Can one "occupy" a space of protest through social media? In this paper, I begin to explore these questions: how does social media help to make sense of urban spaces? How does it help to position people vis-à-vis a politicized city? What is the relationship between people and their media in the context of urban place? And how does the experience of activism re-inscribe the urban scape with meaning and action?

From 2014 to 2017, there have been hundreds of variously organized protests against the Park Geun-hye government. However, allegations of corruption surrounding Park's confidante, Choi Sun-shil, snowballed through 2016 and, by October, protests were reaching historic proportions. Several protests were estimated at over 1 million people (although these numbers are contested by various actors, including organizers, Seoul government officials, the police and the media). The data for this exploratory analysis is drawn from a single, large-scale event: a huge protest and call for the ouster of then-President Park Geun-hye on December 10, 2016.

This paper joins other research that looks to the “cyber-urban,” to the confluence of digital mobilities and space that is re-defining both the practice and the ontologies of the urban (Forlano 2015). Our digital devices seem to confirm Lefebvre's insistence on the multidirectionality of social constructions of the city – and even to facilitate that construction through the formation of seamless urban practice, representation and discourse across multiple modalities. We move, reflect, relate, communicate and act through haptic devices that both grant us more autonomy while tethering us to structures of power and capital (Hjorth 2014). While all of these shifts have precipitated changes in the ways we both theorize and represent the urban, the following examines a moment in that transformation: the meanings and uses of space that emerge through Twitter usage during a large-scale protest in downtown Seoul. Twitter users relate to each other (through following, re-tweeting, hashtagging), to discourse (through the content of tweets and hyperlinks), to media (through photos, GIFs and video clips) and, finally, to urban space itself, which incorporates all of these through the mediated practices of smartphone users. These spaces are “emergent” in that they are not given *a priori*. Instead, the interaction of people, space, movement, smartphone, social media and event render certain sites more prominent or more intelligible than others.

## Gwanghwamun Plaza

“Gwanghwamun” is a reconstruction of a Chosŏn-era gate that marked the entrance into the Gyeongbok Palace.<sup>1</sup> Over decades of colonization, war and explosive modernization, the gate has continued to mark not just the centre of the old city, but the symbolic centre of the nation. Directly in front of Gwanghwamun, Gyeongbok Palace and the President's home (Cheong Wa Dae, sometimes called the “Blue House” after its tiled roof), Gwanghwamun Plaza is a highly visible

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1 Romanizations of Korean are consistent with the McCune-Reischauer system, except in the case of names and place-names that follow either the Revised Romanization system developed by the Korean government (“Gwanghwamun”) or conventional orthographies established through custom (“Park Chung Hee”).

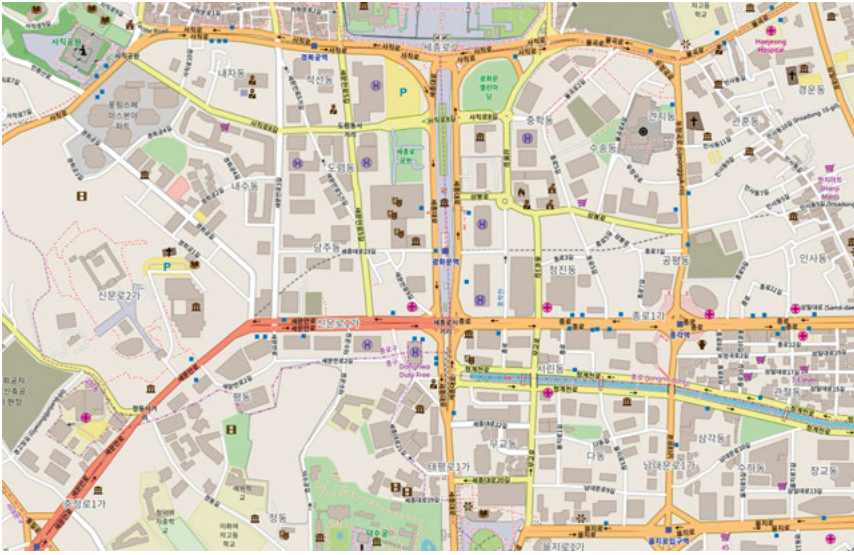


Figure 4: Sejong-daeno, from OpenStreetMap.org.

public space to stage protests, frequently accompanied by large-scale stage performances. Sejong-daeno (Sejong Avenue) runs from Gyeongbok Palace (at the top centre of the map), down past Seoul Station (beyond the bottom of the map). During many of the demonstrations, the entirety of the avenue thronged with protestors, with estimates on the most attended protests at nearly 2 million people.

In many ways, the enormous success of the occupation and the protests have been enabled by Gwanghwamun Plaza itself. Over the past fifteen years, downtown Seoul has been transformed in many ways – new parks, the restoration of the Cheonggyecheon stream through the centre of Seoul, and the opening of major thoroughfares all over the city to pedestrian and bicycle traffic (Ryu 2004). Since its reconstruction in 2008, Gwanghwamun Plaza has provided highly effective visibility for social movements. It is the literal centre of the old, walled city, and it is also symbolically (and even geomantically) the centre of the nation, with the reconstructed Chosŏn palace at the north end of Sejong Avenue and, behind it, the President's house (Yoon 2008). Finally, it is a synecdoche for South Korea's place in the contemporary, global order, with newspapers, Korean conglomerates, global corporations and embassies lining both sides of Sejong Avenue as it moves south from Gwanghwamun. Indeed, the history of the Republic is itself visible (and embodied) along Sejong-daeno, with the (reconstructed) palace, the occasional example of Japanese colonial architecture (e.g., the Dong-a Ilbo Building) and the conspicuously atavistic U. S. embassy, itself an artefact of the beginnings of Korea's developmental state and a reminder of the ambiguities of postcolonial Korea.

On the other hand, the plaza has also figured into city and national efforts at “branding” and commodification through the creation of spectacle; indeed, there is rarely a day when there are not multiple events and festival-like attractions (Kim 2009). Trade shows, free concerts and tourist events transpire next to protest and direct action. In the span of a few feet, one can sample free food products from a regional food show and then walk past buses of conscripted riot police (*kidongdae*). In other words, in this relatively small space, each of these events must contend with the other amidst in an atmosphere riven with politics, global capital and, these days, international tourists visiting sites used for popular K-drama.

Nothing has been more contentious than the Sewol protestors themselves, who remained in their tent occupation for almost 3 years. This tent encampment became a rallying point not only for Sewol families, but for a host of others with grievances against the Park Geun-hye government. When the protests calling for Park Geun-hye’s removal increased in size, frequency and urgency in the wake of revelations of the corruption of Park’s associate, Choi Sun-sil, the Plaza was a natural centre for activism. In August of 2016, large-scale demonstrations were held calling for the President’s removal, reaching a crescendo in December, when protest numbers swelled to over one million and large-scale demonstrations were held simultaneously in South Korea’s other cities.

### **Gwanghwamun, December 10**

The December 10 protest was the 7th, large-scale mobilization of citizens seeking the ouster of the President. It was the largest yet – and like the others, it was also a media spectacle, with politicians and pop stars joining citizen groups and many, ordinary people and students on a cold, Winter evening in Seoul.

People began to gather earlier in the day. By 4:30 pm there were orchestrated protests. At around 5:30, Park Geun-hye supporters (the counter-protestors) began to congregate around the Gyeongbok Palace Subway Station (next to Gwanghwamun). Known as the “Park Sa Mo” (Park Geun-hye Loving People Meet-up), they clashed with protestors, waved Korean flags, and hurled abuse. At 6 pm the protest formally commenced on the main stage directly in front of Gwanghwamun, led by families of the Sewol ship disaster victims. At 7 everyone extinguished their candles and closed their eyes in remembrance of victims of Park Geun-hye’s policies. There was also a concert from the singer Lee Eun-mi and fireworks.

Shortly after the rally had ended, I ran a Twitter search through NodeXL, an open-source spreadsheet and network visualization software that allows queries on multiple social media APIs (Application Programming Interface) (Hansen et al. 2011). Here is a sociograph visualization of tweets downloaded from Twitter’s API containing the keyword “Gwanghwamun”. In this search, the vertices represent Twitter users whose tweet contains the keyword, and the lines connecting the vertices (edges) represent Twitter users who have replied to a tweet, or who are mentioned in a tweet. Most of the mentions are, in fact, retweets.

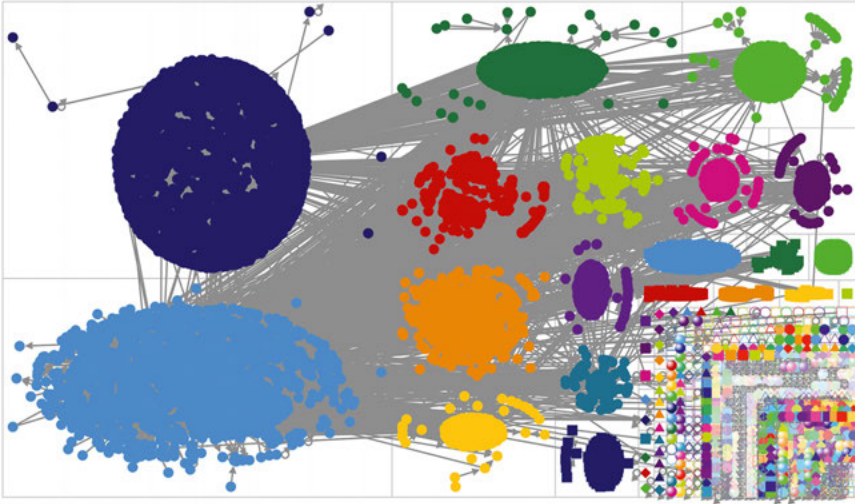


Figure 5: Sociograph visualization of a Twitter search network created around the keyword, “Gwanhwamun”.

In Figure 5 above, Twitter users are grouped into color-coded clusters on the basis of their similarity to each other in terms of their connectedness and their attributes, ordered according to the Clauset-Newman-Moore algorithm (Hansen et al. 2011).<sup>2</sup> These groups are also assigned alphanumeric identifiers (used below), moving by size from G<sub>1</sub> (top left) to G<sub>2</sub> (bottom left) and then to the top row of the middle column (G<sub>3</sub>). After this, the rows move across to G<sub>4</sub>, G<sub>5</sub> and so on. The largest clusters typically reflect a single tweet (e.g., from a news hub like JTBC) and hundreds of re-tweets, while the lower, right corner of the graph show countless “singletons” – Twitter users who have neither replied to another, nor re-tweeted, been re-tweeted nor mentioned.

Here are the quantitative characteristics of the dataset:

Vertices: 10853

Unique edges: 16043

Edges with duplicates: 2633

Total edges: 18,676

Self loops 1215

Connected components: 1173

Average geodesic distance: 4.070718

Graph density: 0.000137591

Modularity: 0.657418

<sup>2</sup> NodeXL’s algorithm assigns arbitrary colours and shapes to clusters in order to assist in the visual differentiation of one from the other.



The graph was laid out according to the Harel-Koren Multiscale layout algorithm, particularly useful for large graphs (Harel and Koren 2002). The low density (0.000137591 out of a maximum density of 1.0) of the graph is typical of large scale social media: most Twitter traffic consists of re-tweets of a few, central tweets, with little traffic between different clusters' followers and re-tweeters (Smith et al. 2014). Indeed, despite some connectivity between clusters, the high modularity suggests considerable coherency within the groups (Himmelboim et al. 2017).

The groups can be differentiated from each other in several ways and according to a number of different metrics, including different measures of centrality (degree centrality, betweenness centrality and Eigenvector centrality). These measures of centrality are often used as indicators of network importance. For example, vertices at the centre of the two clusters on the left of the socio-graph indicate the highest degree centrality; they have the largest number of edges connected to them. Not surprisingly, many of the nodes with high centrality are media hubs (e.g., Newstapa).

We can also characterize the contents of tweets. NodeXL has added a "sentiment analysis" algorithm in its spreadsheet that identifies keywords through models of "salience" that compute frequencies and relationships between word pairs (Hollander et al. 2016). Although there are more robust models for sentiment analysis derived from natural language processing, the results from NodeXL are useful as a way to suggest common themes from a large dataset. Here are the most frequent word pairs identified for several groups. Note that translations of word pairs from Korean to English may exceed two words.



Figure 6: Word-pairs in the "Gwanghwamun" dataset identified through NodeXL sentiment analysis.

After filtering out re-tweets and the groups not concerned with protests at Gwanghwamun, these are the most prominent word pairs in the tweets, ordered by Group number (e. g., G2):

(G2) Gwanghwamun-Plaza; Gwanghwamun-Candlelight Protest; periscope-Lee Shi-gak; Lee Shi-gak, Gwanghwamun; Can-Not; 12-10; 7th-Candlelight Protest; Daum-News; Gwanghwamun-700,000; YouTube – Sir.

(G5) Next Café – At the Present; Next – News; the 7th – Candlelight Protest; Candlelight Protest – Cold; Cold – Weather; Weather – 600,000 People; 600,000 people – In Gwanghwamun Plaza; In Gwanghwamun Plaza – Gathering; Gwanghwamun – Candlelight Protest.

(G6) Today – Gwanghwamun; Last Time – More than Seoul Station; More Than Seoul Station – At Least 20 Times More; From Dongsung – To Gwanghwamun; At Least 20 Times More – Met; Met – From Dongsung; Until Gwanghwamun – Of The Parade; Of the Parade – the End; Absurd – Park Geun-hye; Park Geun-hye – Jongno 3Ga Road.

(G8) Citizen – One Person; One Person – One Person; From Hannam Transport – From Past Days; From Past Days – Operated; Number 129 – Seoul; Seoul – Guro District; Guro District – Gocheok-dong; Gocheok-dong – Departing; Jongno District – From Gwanghwamun; From Gwanghwamun – To the End.

(G9) Gwanghwamun – In the Plaza; Jeon In-gwon – Patriot (song); Patriot – Of Lee Eun-mi; Of Lee Eun-mi – Patriot; Patriot – 2012; 2012 – Presidential Election; Presidential Election – I; I – First; First – Gwanghwamun Campaigning; Gwanghwamun Campaign – Last.

Most of the tweets concern the protests, its events (e.g., the concert), the large numbers of attendees. These suggest the contours of the public debate around the protests, particularly the contrast between G2, G5 and G9 with the counter-protestor cluster in G6, where the impeachment of the president is being contested.

We can also examine sociograph itself for the particular structures of the self-organized network. In their influential report, “Mapping Twitter Topic Networks,” Marc Smith et al. explore the typology of the “Twitterverse” using characteristic shapes for a variety of common, discursive forms, including the “Polarized Crowd,” where a contentious issue has separated people into two clusters with little communication between them, the “Community Cluster,” where different, but related groups, develop around common topics, the “Broadcast Network,” where “many people repeat what prominent news and media organizations tweet,” and, finally, the “Brand Network,” where otherwise disconnected consumers tweet about popular products (Smith et al. 2014: 3).

In the Gwanghwamun example, we can see a combination of these different graph types. In Figure 1 (above), the large component (G1) in the upper left is typical of “Broadcast Network”, with a central tweet being re-tweeted by hundreds

of followers. As Smith *et al.* explain, “Twitter commentary around breaking news stories and the output of well-known media outputs and pundits has a distinct hub and spoke structure in which *many people repeat what prominent news and media organizations tweet*” (3).

Many of the central clusters concerned with the protests suggest less of a “broadcast” style than a “Community Cluster Network.” Smith *et al.* continue: “Some popular topics may develop multiple smaller groups, each with its own audience, influencers and sources of information. These Community Clusters conversations look like bazaars with multiple centres of activity” (3). Finally, there is even (in the sociograph in Figure 5) evidence of a “polarized crowd” network between broadcast networks, community clusters, particularly in G2 and G5.

Applying this typology dramatically illustrates the salience of social network analysis for our understanding of public discourse in terms of clustering and directionality. With Smith *et al.*'s model, we can understand the extent to which the quality of “public” discourse consists in the ways that the public is constituted. Indeed, it is even possible to use their typology as a predictive tool: if we see, for example, two, broad clusters of tweets with few connections between them, then we might surmise that the topic under discussion has been extremely divisive.

But what about location itself? These typologies may be extremely useful in characterizing Twitter's discursive space, but these tweets still refer to actual spaces – at the very least, each contains the keyword, “Gwanghwamun”. Since nearly 90 percent of smartphone users in South Korea access the Internet primarily from their mobile devices, apps like Twitter are likely to be used by people on the move (Jung 2015). We therefore need to understand the spatial relationships users form and express through the Twitter platform.

## Occupy Gwanghwamun

It seems obvious here that the struggle for justice for Sewol victims, the fight against corruption and, ultimately, the demand for former President Park Geun-hye's resignation take place not just in discourse and in media, but in space. In other words, it matters that the focus for the protests is Gwanghwamun. On the other hand, although protest and civil unrest have always been about space, social media adds another wrinkle (Campbell 2017). “Liberated” from any, single location, social media might seem to obviate the importance of the local. But it seems that the opposite has happened, and that the local has never been more important.

The literature on recent social movements has also been a rich source of insights on social activism, social media and space, including work on the Occupy Movement and the “Arab Spring” (Sharp and Panetta 2016). In these movements, social media have been used to assemble people in space and to communicate something of the meaning of that space (Juris 2012; Tremayne 2014). Here, the social media are themselves an important step in wresting public spaces away from

corporate and government hegemony by creating alternative narratives generated through horizontal organizing on Facebook and Twitter. People not only articulate their claims to a “right to the city”; they also recursively define what those rights should be (Harvey 2013). In other words, activism flows from virtual forums to physical space and back again through shared media content. As ALSayyad and Guvenc (2015) write of Tahrir Square: “At many rallies, protestors could be seen holding smart phones in one hand and anti-state banners in the other. And from the tents in occupied squares, Internet users disseminated images and messages of protest to the rest of the world.” (2028)

Social media have a well-documented role in organizing people in space and in broadcasting that message abroad. In the Arab Spring, the ability of protesters to upload media and to disseminate their message brought assistance, empathy, embarrassment to the entrenched regimes, and, ultimately, stimulated other protests around the Arab world. It allowed organizers to transcend the physical space of protest to the “mediascapes” that connect like-minded supporters around the world (Appadurai 1996). That social media, ALSayyad and Guvenc argue, was one factor in the spread of the idea and the language of protest throughout the Arab world. But, they remind us, the influence of social media was also tied to the meanings of those places. For example, ALSayyad and Guvenc (2015) outline this fluid movement from mobilization in space to digital platforms.

Simply put, neither the regimes nor the traditional mainstream media would have paid attention to the protestors had they not forcefully taken over symbolic spaces in these cities. Yet we also need to look at the new urban dynamics that resulted from complex social and political relations – where, for example, new social media has become a subversive apparatus in the articulation of politics and the reappropriation of urban space. (2030)

That is, social media become more than the dissemination of reports from the “front lines”; content uploaded to different platforms also had the effect of inflecting Tahrir Square with new, oppositional meanings.

On the other hand, the emphasis on space in recent social movements has also been thought of as more problematic. The Occupy Movement involved the occupation of specific places: Zucotti Park (New York), St. Paul’s Cathedral (London), Los Angeles’s City Hall, St. James Park (Toronto). But some theorists have questioned whether a global movement should have so closely identified itself with hyper-local occupations.

During this period, the ‘space of representations’ of Occupy’s networks – a global movement seeking radical structural change – became increasingly tied and trapped to the place of protest (i. e. camps), which acted as a barrier to occupiers’ perceived and conceived spaces of activism, limiting the movement’s capacity to identify and mobilize across more topological connections. (Halvorsen 2017: 5)

In Halvorsen's account, the attention and energy lavished on the occupation came at the expense of horizontal ties between groups in a network of activists. The resulting split between occupiers and other activists, he suggests, resulted in a weakened, divisive movement. Yet, would an Occupy movement have been possible without a spatial practice? How much of one, and how much of the other? Or can they be parsed so easily? This ambivalence is testament to the deep connections between them – that is, it may not be possible to imagine organizing in “real” space without the “virtuality”.

In any case, these scholars raise interesting questions. In activism – and, by extension, in other forms of concerted, human organizing – what is the relationship of the “shape” of social networks to the “shape” of urban space? Other recent political movements have also utilized social media, and have also concentrated on both the symbolic value and the physical occupation of an urban space. The assumption is usually that space is elaborated through social networks – e.g., through “co-presence” people extend their relationships beyond physical spaces (Hjorth 2014; Ozkul 2013). But what does that mean for the city? I have argued elsewhere that social media allow people to establish a latent relationship to space through their social connections, but the relationship to contemporary activism is less clear (Collins 2014).

### The transformation of Gwanghwamun Plaza

There is a wide literature on the language of protest in South Korea. For example, the Korean democratic movement has a large body of associated signs, slogans, chants, music and performance associated with it – some of which still has relevance in today's struggles (Abelmann 1996). But this doesn't speak to the more quotidian ways protestors encounter and construct the space of protest through language, text and “geosemiotics” (Rojo 2014). Nor does it address the ways protests transform urban space through their social media practice. There are many ways that vast sociographs of social media connections can be connected to space, but one of the most accessible is through the contents of tweets themselves.

In the following, I filtered the December 10 dataset for prepositions of place – in front of (*ap*) and next to (*yŏp*). In addition, I also searched for specific places, including “underground” (referring to the subway and connecting tunnels beneath Gwanghwamun) and “tent,” referring to the Sewol families tent encampment. Each of these can be represented with its own sociograph as a subset of the twitter users in Figure 5. The following graph shows Figure 5 filtered for the preposition of place “in front of”:

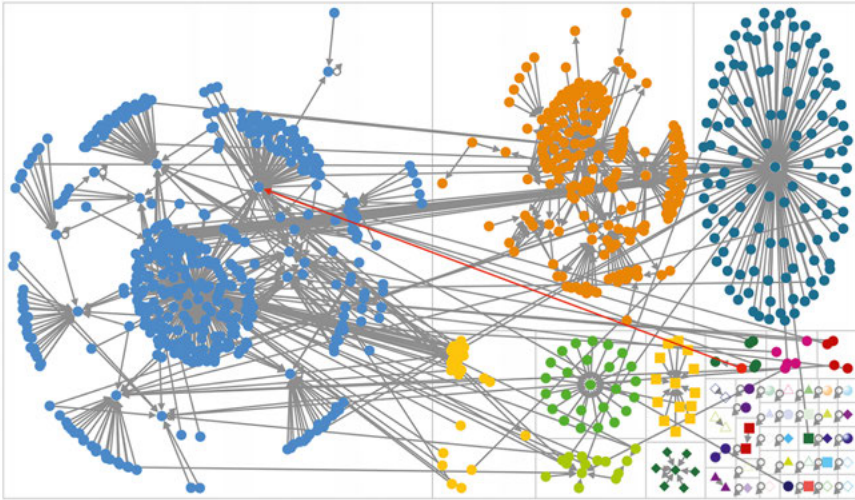


Figure 7: Twitter network visualization showing Twitter users and their tweets with keywords “Gwanghwamun” and “ap”.

While most of the tweets from Figure 5 have been filtered out, the graph in Figure 7 demonstrates the widespread usage of “in front of” in tweets containing a reference to Gwanghwamun. Other prepositions and places also suggest widespread usage across clusters. But what are Twitter users in front of? That is, were there patterns in usage across tweets that suggest constructions of space? The dataset visualized in Figure 5 can be filtered for different prepositions, each suggesting different spatial relationships in the content of a connected tweet. The following thematic analysis paraphrases common twitter threads utilizing these prepositions or places to discuss Gwanghwamun Plaza.<sup>3</sup>

#### Themes: “In front of”

1. Coming within 100 meters in front of the Blue House.
2. A woman in front of the Paris Baguette gives someone candy, and they give it to the person next to them, as they walk towards Gwanghwamun.
3. People are meeting in front of the JTBC truck.

3 Some scholars have suggested that reproducing tweets in academic papers is ethical practice, “because tweets are inherently public and readable, when posted to a public account, by anyone with an Internet connection” (Thelwall 2014: 85). But I have tried to consider not just the platform, nor even just the uses that Twitter has authorized for its user data through its API, but the intentions of users themselves. Accordingly, I have not included the tweets themselves (either in the original Korean or in translation) out of deference to users who, while they may have assented to making their work public, have not consented to having their work dissected in an academic paper (Collins and Durlington 2014).

4. Counter-protestors meeting in front of the Dong-a Ilbo Building.
5. Wondering if the area in front of the Blue House has become a playground for the left.
6. The Mayor and concerned citizens meeting in front of the “conch tower” sculpture at the Cheonggyecheon.
7. The scene in front of the Gwanghwamun tents is of wind blowing and songs being sung under a cloudy moon.
8. On a cold night, a massive crowd of 600,000 people thronged from Gwanghwamun to the front of the Chosŏn Ilbo building.
9. Complaining that they barely managed to get to the counter-protest in front of the Dong-a Ilbo building because of all the protestors.
10. Got as far as the in front of the Blue House but there’s no room in Gwanghwamun so they had to wait far outside the Plaza.
11. Announcement that gobalnews.com, Twitter, YouTube etc., will be mobilizing for a live broadcast in front of City Hall and Gwanghwamun.
12. Meeting citizens in front of the ChongunDong Community Centre at sunset who are there to surround the Blue House.
13. Planning to meet in front of the Anguk Station and then continue to the Blue House.
14. In front of the DongA newspaper Building, but can’t hear any sounds because they’re listening to their iPhone.
15. Catching a taxi in front of Chogyesa on the way to the counter protest.
16. Setting off a fireworks finale in front of the Cheong-un Hyojadong Community Centre.
17. Critique of democratic party politicians for preening in front of the camera.
18. Calling for counter protestors to group in front of the Gwanghwamun Post Office.
19. Happy that there’s a wave of flag-waving counter-protestors from the Gwanghwamun at the intersection in front of City Hall.
20. A scene from Gwanghwamun Plaza – a line of people in front of the Sewol Ship Disaster memorial altar.
22. Standing in front of the stage looking at the crowd of people united in their desire for Park Geun-hye’s resignation.
23. Call for counter protestors to confront protestors in front of the Blue House.

#### **Thematic analysis: Next to**

1. Walking next to Mun Jae-in.
2. Sitting on the steps of the Hyundai Automotive building next to the Starbucks.
3. Surprised that the person next to you is a Park Geun-hye supporter.
4. Person sitting next to them talking about Lee Eun-mi.
5. Writers group meeting next to the Lee Sun-shin Statue.
6. Volunteers sitting next to the person playing with light wands.

#### **Thematic analysis: “Tent”**

1. Right-wing groups are hassling people at the Sewol Families tent. Calls to protect the tents.
2. Calls to protect the tents and the disabled rights activists from the Park Sa Mo group.

3. Reminder that after the rally is over, the Sewol families and supporters will be spending the night in tents in the cold.
4. Criticizing the mayor for tearing down unlicensed residences in Seoul while allowing the Sewol tents to remain.

### **Thematic analysis: “Underground”**

1. People pouring out of the subway,
2. Right-wing groups are abusing the sit-down protestors in the Gwanghwamun Station and taking the banners for “Park Geun-hye Resign Station”.
3. Can’t get out/in of the subway station because there are so many people waving flags.
4. There’s a surge of counter-protestors at the entrance to the subway.
5. Counter-protestors taking Sewol yellow ribbons and ripping down signs in the subway.
6. Reporting that city hall has ordered the subway station to stop selling tickets in order to discourage counter-protestors.
7. As the plaza swells with protestors, the subway reports ‘extreme congestion’.
8. The subway reports 790,000 passengers.
9. An older man on the subway was calling everyone a bunch of communists.
10. They walked through a bunch of right-wing lunatics on the way down to the subway.
11. Moving at a turtle’s pace after coming out of the subway.
12. Surprised that counter-protestors are tearing down the disabled person’s rights tent in the subway station.
13. A drunk guy on the subway exclaiming that he’s going to Gwanghwamun.

### **Discussion: Twitter City**

Through Twitter, a version of Gwanghwamun is represented, but it’s one that emerges out of the encounter of activists with the Plaza. It is contingent on the logistics of a massive protest, the lines drawn by riot police, and the formation of new structures of protest erected in the square (e.g., the stage, the tents). In these geographic transformations, certain places become important, while others become less consequential – but every site along the Plaza takes on different valences in the time-space of protest. Here are some examples:

- a) As symbolic spaces. Many tweets concern the closeness of the protest to the Blue House. Being 100 meters “in front” of the Blue House means challenging the former President directly: 100 meters is the security perimeter. Counter-protestors also use this image in a more alarmist register, one that perhaps references an elite North Korean military unit that was able to come within 100 meters of the Blue House in a 1968 raid that was aimed at assassinating Park Geun-hye’s father, Park Chung Hee. Similarly, sitting amidst the Sewol tent encampment, or in front of the stage, and hearing singing from the throngs of protestors is the symbolic heart of the protest. Here, being “in front of” locates one at the centre of protest and activism.



- b) As meeting places. The tweets draw an alternative geography of Gwanghwamun around the logistics of meeting. These include, for example, the counter protestors in front of the old Dong-A newspaper building (now the Ilmin Museum), the mayor and supporters at the conch shell sculpture (*Sola Tap*) and a group of writers at the Lee Sun-shin statue. The wide Avenue decomposes into a series of rallying points for different groups.
- c) As reference point. The size of large-scale protest is always contested, with authorities consistently under-counting protestors in order to minimize and contain the importance of the struggle. Journalists and other people use reference points in the square to evoke the size of the crowd. Photographs and film clips that accompanied tweets emphasized the vast size of the crowd, and the language underscored the unprecedented scale of the protests. Writing that the crowd stretches from Gwanghwamun to the Chosŏn Ilbo building evokes size through easily identified landmarks. Or complaining about the impossibility of entering Gwanghwamun Plaza because of the congestion lends a tactile dimension to numerical reports.
- d) As sites of struggle. This iteration of the protests brought a strong, reactionary contingent of pro-Park Geun-hye supporters. Their confrontations with protestors transformed the Gwanghwamun subway station and the 4-way intersection in front of the Gwanghwamun gate into contested spaces, where the signs calling for impeachment (*t'anhaek*) of the former President visibly clashed with Korean flags. In the subway, counter-protestors assailed a tent protest from disability rights activists, and this proved a rallying point for protestors who expressed their disgust and outrage over the attacks and verbal abuse. Finally, the subway itself, as a place (or a non-place) that brings together strangers in close proximity, becomes a space where people perform politics.
- e) Other geographies. In a massive demonstration, the crowd itself becomes part of the geography. A crowd or throng (*inp'a, unsu*) becomes something to navigate, to be swept along with, to identify oneself with, to criticize. Absent geographies are also important; the U.S. embassy, the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History and the KT Building are all prominent along Sejong-daeno, yet do not figure in tweets during the protest. Some of these are off-limits, but others lack the symbolic weight to make them significant in the geography of the protest.

But there are many other absences in these tweets:

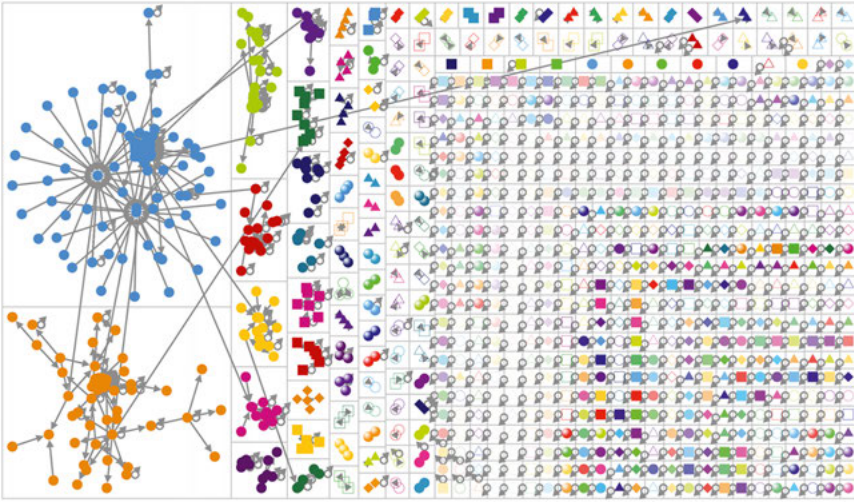


Figure 8: Sociograph of tweets from Figure 1 with re-tweets filtered out.

Comparing the graph above to the sociograph of the entire dataset in Figure 5 at the beginning of the essay, we can see that most of the edges in the original graph are re-tweets. The above graph with the re-tweets removed has 1521 edges: only 8% of the total. What about the remaining 17,155 edges? Some of them, we can surmise, are the work of Twitterbots: automated accounts that exist to endlessly propagate messages towards commercial or political ends. For example, an analysis of bot traffic during the Brexit debates in Great Britain showed that bot traffic generated one-third of the tweets about Brexit (Howard and Kollyani 2016). Why would Twitterbots be used here? One reason may be to simply clog the Twitter feed in order to drown out the voices of activists with either reactionary content or with unrelated material tweeted under the same hashtag. This has been a strategy in suppressing dissent since at least 2011, when the Putin government used it to neutralize protests against parliamentary elections (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015).

There are different tools for the detection of bots, but I have not used them with this dataset.<sup>4</sup> After all, not all re-tweets are the work of automated accounts. People re-tweet for a variety of reasons that can include their subjective alignment with the tweet, their support of the tweet's author, their membership in a community of like-minded Twitter users, and their desire to "piggyback" their own meanings on the original tweet (Weller 2016). Outside of the behaviour of twitterbots, then, we should look to retweeting as a form of social action with

4 Bot detection looks to a variety of indicators in order to determine whether a Twitter user represents a real user or institution, or whether it is an automated bot. These include examining tweet behaviour, profile, and social relationships between users followed and following (Mowbray 2014).

its own varied intentionalities. The importance of media content cannot be overlooked: people retweeted evocative photos of the demonstrations, with particular importance placed on the panoptic photos of the protestors extending down Sejong-daemo. Finally, it's entirely possible that people re-tweeted because they were also at the protest: in these cases, the sentiment of the Tweet or the uploaded media resonates with the Twitter user, who may retweet the original or an edited version of the original tweet. But deciding actually who was there and who was not presents formidable challenges.

## Problems with Geolocation

There have been various attempts to locate enormous sets of social network data in space. One of the most dramatic has been to utilize geolocational tagging to map social network users onto a city (Neuhaus 2011). But this suffers from an obvious flaw: a very small percentage of social media users have geo-tagged their content – as low as 0.5% – although the power of Big Data is such that geolocational tags are not necessarily needed for data scientists to algorithmically track people in urban space (Mahmud et al. 2014).

But perhaps the difficulty of establishing geolocation may be the point. The data collected through the “Gwanghwamun” search yielded only 39 geolocated tweets: barely 0.21% of the total dataset. In Korea, geolocational data has not been popular precisely because of its problematic relationship to the state and corporations. And, indeed, some scholars have linked the rise of South Korea's impressive information technology infrastructures to the development of State surveillance (Kim 2004). A 2014 scandal involving government plans to collect and monitor private messages on South Korea's universally popular messaging app, KaoKaoTalk, led to a (comparatively) brief period of mass defections to non-Korean platforms. It's clear that people in South Korea (and elsewhere) balk at the idea of being tracked through their devices. But is being geolocated a requirement for placemaking and belonging in social media? In this dataset, the “location” data that people include in their Twitter profiles is not especially helpful: “On Earth”, “in bed,” “In a state of boredom,” etc. It is, in fact, a bit subversive – satirizing geolocation by being too broad (“the universe”) or too subjective (“in my head”).

While people might hesitate to share their location, there may be another dynamic: ambiguous location can mean that one cannot be located, but it can also mean that one can be located anywhere. These “locations” may be less about denying definable geolocation than suggesting a “presence” that can include space, social life and ideas. The ambiguity itself allows for multiple lines of filiation and entanglements. After all, as many scholars have argued, the identity of an individual and a place has de-coupled over the development of social media. “Not only have ICTs loosened the relationship between place and community, they allow people to be engaged in communities anchored in multiple places” (Good-

speed 2017: 13). With social media, this “loosening” is not evidence of a *lack* of identification of place; it’s an acknowledgement of the desire to be in many places, and in relationships with many people and ideas. In the end, it does not reject the salience of geographic place. For example, as Halegoua et al. (2016) suggest in their work on “jumping” in Foursquare, people who “check-in” in places they have never visited that are impossibly far from their homes in Jakarta may not only give users pleasure, but may form the basis for future face-to-face meetings in Indonesia.

## The Rise of the Slacktivist

In his 2010 article, “Small change,” Malcolm Gladwell panned the “slacktivism” he saw proliferating through social media – the “likes,” “shares” and varied emoticons of a public unlikely to show up for a protest nor donate. The “slacktivist” is ineffective precisely because they have a tenuous, low- or no-risk connection to the cause. On the other hand, in a study of the viral spread of the HRC (Human Right Coalition) Marriage Equality logo in 2013, Vie (2014) asserts that “these kinds of digital activism over time can lead to more substantive off-line action.”

I would suggest that the December 10 protests re-create the city along real and virtual dimensions simultaneously, and the ambiguities of location, presence and absence are part of the process of creating an activist potentiality through Seoul (and, by extension, the nation). Through the engagement with sites along Sejong Avenue, and with media created through and about the protests, citizens literally create a space not only for protest, but for the discourse of protest. That is, they achieve a “co-presence” of protest distributed across the symbolic territory of the nation, one that includes both material place and digital presence.

A complex event like a protest exists on many levels. In Okabe’s and Ito’s original formulation, co-presence is constructed in the shadow of physical presence. That is, people sandwich their face-to-face meetings between co-presences sustained through messaging apps: where will they meet? Who’s going to be late? And who had to leave early but still wants to be part of the conversation? As Ito writes,

In the case of text messaging, we found that many messages are exchanged for the purposes of maintaining lightweight contact and co-presence, and don’t perform an explicit communication function. Between friends and intimates who one is in regular touch with, text messages do not need to be interesting or newsworthy to be worth sending. (Ito 2005)

Based on Ito’s argument, we would expect that smart phone use in Gwanghwamun would fill some of the same functions – that it would, in other words, serve to connect (and re-connect) like-minded activists in order to virtually re-confirm co-presence.

But, in some ways, the ambiguity of location would seem to contradict the point of ICT-mediated co-presence. If you're on the way to Gwanghwamun, you might broadcast your presence. "I'm on the steps next to the Hyundai Building." "Co-presence" in this way precedes, anticipates or simulates physical encounters, and bridges spatial gaps between people who may be active – or merely sympathetic – but not physically present in Gwanghwamun. But what about re-tweets? Agreement, solidarity, and perhaps co-presence? It's unclear what status these tweets suggest. First-person presence? A kind of slacktivism by co-presence?

What smartphones seem to do is to define a social media space that encompasses sentiment, spatial practice and social action. The ambiguity is a by-product of Twitter – spatial, non-spatial, temporal, non-temporal. For example, one person tweeted that, after nine hours, they had gotten as far as the police barricades along Gwanghwamun before knocking off to get something to eat. Having eaten, they felt re-energized and included a photo of the empty bowls from their food in the tweet. Here, the user communicates their presence and their struggle through description "standing in front of the police bus barricades" as well as through a photo. Another user writes that they've found a place to sit outside of the of the Gwanghwamun subway stop in front of the Hyundai Automobile Building, and includes a photo of protestors. Again, the affirmation of presence. But both tweets were also re-tweeted several times by users who were not otherwise present in the December 10 database. What does it mean then? Solidarity with the speaker? Co-presence? Imagined co-presence?

## Conclusions

The sociograph has become the iconic representation of networked media; media that connect users, institutions and concepts in complex ways that become visible (and, perhaps, also occluded) in the vertices and edges of the graph. These diagrams (e. g., Figure 5 above) spatialize social and semantic relationships using a variety of algorithms, but this paper has argued that these social networks are simultaneously spatial networks, connecting people to an emergent space of protest even as they network users to each other. Geographies emerge from collective action, even as these protests are shaped by the urban venues in which they are sited. In tweeting place during the Seoul protests, Gwanghwamun Plaza develops into significant touchstones that are not only about the logistics of protest ("Where should we meet?") but about the meanings of these spaces (Gwanghwamun subway stop becoming the "Park Geun-hye Resign Subway Station"). But just as the sociograph includes users who have not produced any content directly (in the form of re-tweeting and following), so, too, do social networks about protesting in Gwanghwamun Plaza feature users without demonstrable relationships to the Plaza itself. Do these matter?

I have argued elsewhere that re-tweets and following (as well as “likes” and other expressions of vague support) are ultimately constitutive of meaning in networked environments. That is, the re-tweets constitute the meaning of a tweet by associating it with (and thereby rendering it visible to) certain classes of user accounts and not with others (Collins and Durnington 2014). As many progressive academics have discovered, the tweet that is re-tweeted by like-minded colleagues means something very different than one that is re-tweeted by, say, reactionary conservatives. Likewise, the meaning of space is formed not just through its representation in any one tweet, but through both the repetition of content and through the connections of those repetitions to other users across multiple politics. The challenge of social network analysis in the era of networked activism is precisely this: how to analyse all of these different dimensions of meaning, space and social life through both presence and absence without privileging one over the other? The bias in most social network analysis is to the social relations themselves – as the sociograph as a technological artefact might suggest. Similarly, analyses of social protest focus on spatiotemporal presence to the exclusion of more ephemeral relationships. But through including a spatial dimension in social network analysis that is not premised on geolocation, we can engage networked behaviour that is at once social and spatial through both presence and absence. In Gwanghwamun Plaza, the ultimate meanings will always include (among other things) the physicality of the city, the social connections that people make through it, and large orbits of meaning and connection that include the nation as not only an “imagined community” but also a sphere of imagined connection and spatiality.

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