

Myung Oh and James F. Larson, **Digital Development in Korea: Building an Information Society**, London, UK: Routledge, 2011, 237 pp., \$135 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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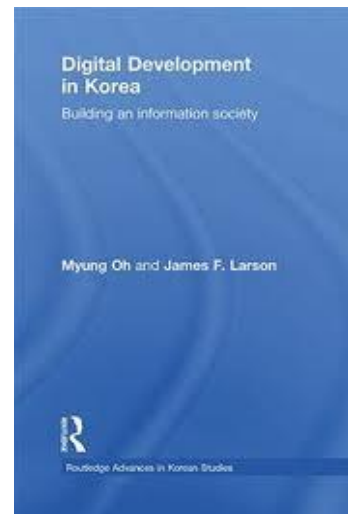
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South Korea is well-known for its remarkable technology-driven economy and digitally connected society. The media often portray Korea as one of the most wired nations in the world and frequently publish images of Koreans streaming TV to mobile phones while riding the subway and using them to pay for bus fares. However, despite the large volume of industry and press reports, there is a scarcity of scholarly documents examining the detailed history of South Korea's information and communication technology development (ICTD). In **Digital Development in Korea: Building an Information Society**, Authors Myung Oh and James F. Larson attempt to bridge this gap by leveraging Oh's direct involvement during the 1980s in the creation of Korea's telecommunication policy as a means to further understand the country's journey to becoming a leading global example of an information society.

Their book is relevant not only to leaders in developing countries who wish to create a recipe for successful ICTD but also to scholars who are interested in the role of communications technologies as a catalyst for economic growth.

Digital Development in Korea illustrates how quickly South Korea has transformed itself from a war-torn country to one of the world's most advanced knowledge economies and analyzes how the nation made this transformation within three decades. In the past, Korea exhibited a low level of ICT; for example, the country did not adopt color television broadcasting until 1980. In contrast, by that same year, the United States and Japan had already been using this technology for 29 and 20 years, respectively. Under the strong guidance of the government, however, Korea strengthened its telecommunications infrastructure over a relatively short period of time to where it currently ranks number-one in the world in terms of broadband Internet connectivity. The Berkman Center at Harvard University (2010) used multiple measures gauging international ICTD (e.g., OECD's household Internet penetration) to make this determination.

Despite this impressive ranking, South Korea was, ironically, one of the last nations in the world to adopt widespread use of smartphones. In 2007, when the iPhone was released in the United States, other companies launched their own smartphones to compete against Apple. Yet Koreans did not respond to the trend for 2-1/2 years. According to Oh and Larson, the primary reason for this inaction was the fear by mobile service providers of losing profits on voice service. If smartphones were introduced, Korean telecommunications companies worried that their business model, which relied heavily on voice revenue,



would be broken. The authors also hinted at the possible failure of political policy as another reason, but did not elaborate on it in detail.

The major contribution of this book—understanding South Korea’s rapid digital development—is found in the second chapter which describes ICTDs in South Korea during the 1980s. Since the Korean War (1950–1953) had destroyed the country’s infrastructure, the government determined that “digital development was the nation’s destiny” and focused most of its efforts on strengthening this sector (p. 2). The authors argue that the advancements during this time were significant, because they laid the groundwork for the nation’s long-term goals for future ICT innovations: for example, the completion of the TDX (time division exchange) project, which switched the country’s telephone systems from analog to digital, built the brain and nervous system of Korea’s Internet system, and eventually made the country’s current digital networks possible. *Digital Development in Korea* outlines the debates over this TDX project, the parties involved in the decision-making process, and the results of this technology revolution. Such anecdotal detail is possible because Oh, over a seven-year span, served as vice minister and as minister of communications in South Korea and was directly involved in formulating and distributing the TDX system.

Additionally, the book explores the proactive role of the Korean government which propelled the nation’s broadband revolution in the 1990s and its mobile phone development in the early 21st century. The Korean leadership firmly believed that advanced ICTs would drive the nation’s economic growth; therefore, the government prioritized the construction of information highways and elicited cooperation from different industries to restructure its telecommunications. Although this type of management may seem oppositional to the democratic movement of that time, the authors stress that the leadership was actually much more autonomous than the heavy-handed government style that characterized the 1970s. The governance in Korea from 1980 onward is described as one that steers networks of the state, local, and private sectors for effective coordination.

In addition to historical accounts and scientific analyses, *Digital Development in Korea* incorporates the cultural aspects of South Korea to explain its remarkable success in ICT development. One reason is the strong emphasis that Koreans place on interpersonal relationships. Because the nation has a homogenous culture where everyone shares the same ethnic background, language, and cultural heritage, Koreans tend to interact closely with other members of the family, local community, school, and other social reference groups. The phenomenon of the PC bang or PC café, where people meet to play video games in the same room, is representative of such connected communities in South Korea and further fostered the development of communication technology.

Chapter 8 asserts that Korea’s strong commitment to education is another factor responsible for the fast development of ICT. The focus by parents on their children’s academic achievement is so strong that it is considered obsessive and has warranted the term “education fever.” Families in South Korea are known to spend thousands of dollars on extracurricular academic programs to improve their children’s performance in the classroom and help them gain admittance to the most prestigious universities. A recent World Bank and OECD study alludes to the country’s pursuit of education as the driving force behind its efficient innovation system, which comprises firms, research centers, universities, think tanks,

and similar organizations. South Korea also has many skilled technology workers due to the emphasis in computer science education at the junior college, vocational, and university levels. Consequently, the nation leads the world in the proportion of post graduate science degrees per 100,000 employed people.

Although *Digital Development in Korea* provides a rich illustration of Korea's ICTDs, one potential weakness lies in the lack of theoretical framework when utilizing South Korea as a case study. The authors draw upon Wilson's (2006) strategic restructuring model, which stresses the role of structures, institutions, and politics and government policies in shaping ICT diffusion. Yet the application of this theory is indirect and unspecific, as the content of the book does not strictly adhere to the framework of the model. While the authors emphasize how instrumental the Korean government was in pushing digital development from the 1980s, the connection between the theoretical model and their accounts of Korean experiences is not apparent.

Overall, *Digital Development in Korea* is a unique and comprehensive exploration of the country's experiences with the expansion of digital information and communications technology. The detailed accounts of the revolutionary developments from the 1980s provide a useful context to understand information typically excluded from other industry reports. Authors Oh and Larson also do an incisive job of balancing scientific analyses with cultural exploration. They use quantitative measures to analyze South Korea's ICT rankings and qualitative approaches, such as the examination of cultural settings and specificities, to explain the rapid growth in the country's ICT sector. In conclusion, the book is highly recommended for those interested in the impact of ICTD on a nation's economy and the role of the South Korean government in building an information society.

References

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