Channeling workplace sentiment: Phatic communion as regime and refuge in South Korea's computer age

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Introduction

Around the globe, the computer era made promises of hyper-connected, effortless, and democratic future societies and workplaces. More often the realities were cold, disconnected, and individualized, often experienced in the form of unreliable technologies, deskilled work, and retrenched organizational hierarchies.[1] Within this dynamic, acts of adaptation and acceptance took different forms, from those who resisted this promise entirely, such as labor unions in Japan in the 1970s which actively opposed government-led computerization, and those who leaned into it, such as American office workers who tried to make the cubicle "cool" in the 1980s.[2] Taking up the case of South Korea, this chapter draws attention to a different side of computerization: its relational aspects. By that, I mean the ways that computers reshaped existing social connections or enabled new ones, often through sentimental ties between individuals or small groups. These social connections, or the possibility of them, were both leveraged by governments and corporations to animate large-scale computerization projects and sought out by office workers when they had access to private or commercial networks outside of the workplace.

1 Michael Homberg writes on computerization in India, for instance: "However, against all utopian dreams linked to the 'computer revolution,' the digital society quickly developed its own hierarchies. Its knowledge system separated computer literates and illiterates and sharply distinguished administrators, developers, and users. It built new digital walls between nations and caused new 'digital divides,' both nationally and globally, while excluding its citizens with regard to race, class, and gender. In India, such digital divides were also emerging on various levels: between rich and poor, between urban and rural regions, and also between the sexes." Homberg, "Digital India," 317. See other global cases in Van Lente, *Prophets of Computing*.

2 In Japan, Tessa Morris-Suzuki notes that Japanese unions strongly resisted the office automation drive that was being promulgated by the government. A 1977 opposition by government workers to computerize public records would last two years. Morris-Suzuki, *Beyond Computopia*, 168. For the American case, see Liu, *Laws of Cool*, 76–77.

There is a clear difference, however, between the organic sociality of actual office workers on private computer networks and communication channels and the fictive sociality promoted by state and corporate depictions of workplace connections. Following historian William Reddy, we can think about this as a distinction between an "emotional regime" which shapes public and organizational dispositions to new developments on one side, and an "emotional refuge" which provides a release from these norms through private, closed, or anonymous sites of communication, on the other.[3] Across both poles, tropes of enhanced social connections mediated by computers played an important part. I highlight the following points about South Korea's computer age: first, that talk between individuals and computers was an important part of how the new computer era was narrated for mass, non-specialist computer users. State, mass media, and corporate actors promoted the euphoria of connecting to far-away others through computer networks using individual stories and graphics, positing the joy of increased speed and efficiency of office technology. Likewise, office workers also sought out intimate connections with others through new "clubs" on bulletin-board networks. Second, I highlight periods of influence and appropriation. Organic social connections in early online bulletin boards emerged in part from the structures set up by government-sponsored corporate networks. As these private networks became both popular and legitimate outside of corporate walls, corporations attempted to replicate or capture their intimacy within new company channels. From the structures of these workplace channels, newer iterations of independent workplace channels would emerge. This chapter thus points to the importance of comparing projections and realities of social connection enabled by the computer age, as well as movements across state, corporate, and civil spheres.

Because it was a key site of capitalist development and Cold War forces in the twentieth century, South Korea is often remarked for its relative success or even speed of development vis-à-vis the "undeveloped" world from the 1960s onward. Throughout the late twentieth century, South Korea's developmental state, and, to various degrees, corporations and the media, were thoroughly embracing of state projects to render the country a *seonjinguk* or "developed country" through technology.[4] These efforts also involved computerization, beginning in different forms from the 1960s, through society-wide campaigns that would make development tangible and realizable.[5] The period of the 1980s and 1990s coincided with mass computerization efforts around office, industry, and home life, not to mention urban spaces and infrastructures. This period also coincided with a changing political and social context, as the country shifted from almost thirty years of near-continuous rule by military dictatorships (1961–1987) to a multi-party democratic system after 1987 with

3 Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 128–30.

4 Kim, "Science, Technology, and the Imaginaries."

5 Jo, "Computopia and Its Discontents."

greater civil and political freedoms. Cutting across this period, particularly through the 1980s and 1990s, the corporate workplace became a site of increasing social and economic mobility as large corporate groups began to provide pipelines for middle-class achievement in line with state development goals. Central to this mobility, however, was a focus on normative family structures with breadwinner husbands/fathers who worked long hours in company cultures that modeled themselves on the military.[6] In this context, women worked in organizationally supportive roles but were largely expected to leave the workforce after marriage and childbirth to focus on the domestic sphere.[7] Likewise, due to the later introduction of office-based work in South Korea compared to the West, there was not a strict binary between male managers and female secretaries or typists; while these roles existed, male office workers were also arrayed in stratified ranks in which low-level typing or reporting work would be done by men and hand-drafting of formal documents would be specialized work.

Thus, office computerization would not follow the same conflicts that mark North American or European contexts which had been structured by gender-divided roles throughout the twentieth century. The introduction of computers would complicate these dynamics, requiring significant shifts in the gendering of both technologies and office roles, as many scholars have noted, along with other chapters in this volume.[8] Nevertheless, because South Korea was intimately connected to the United States during the Cold War, American government and corporate influences would have a strong role in shaping the introduction of computers as well as providing a kind of developmental benchmark for South Korea to compare itself to and to receive recognition from. Thus, computerization projects spanned both military and democratic regimes, as developmental concerns and ideas about "catching up" were paramount at the national level.

In this context, I focus on what could be described as relatively minor technologies of the computer era – communication channels, which I take to include conferencing, bulletin board systems, messengers, and forums that developed during this period. From the point of view of technological history, these do not often garner significant attention; however, they played important roles.[9] In one sense, images of communication channels that spanned geography and operated at faster speeds were important for government, media, and corporate actors to visualize the new

6 Moon, *Militarized Modernity*, 42.

7 As anthropologist Laurel Kendall notes, in 1988, 84 out of 85 women in South Korea in their thirties was married. Kendall, *Getting Married*, 4.

8 See Schirvar, "Machinery for Managers"; Markussen, "Constructing Easiness"; Stein, "Domesticity, Gender"; Van Oost, *Making the Computer Masculine*; Hicks, *Programmed Inequality*. This is not to say computers were not masculinized in South Korea. See Misu Na's analysis of the masculinization of computer advertising in 1990s South Korea. Na, "Cultural Construction."

9 See Kevin Driscoll's account in *The Modem World*.

possibilities of office automation and computer networking in the 1980s. They were also important for showing human users first embracing what were, up to then, highly specialized machines. In another sense, the advent of computer-based channels, first linked through modems and telephone networks, offered means for workers to connect with others and share their private feelings about their work lives. Both of these dimensions were covered in popular Korean news media at the time, which documented the latest changes in government approaches, corporate developments, and emerging forms of social practice.

From the perspective of emotions and its practices, I draw on the notion of "phatic communion," a sociolinguistic concept referring to the ways that people make the most basic of social connections through the exchange of words. Phatic communion can happen through simple greetings such as "How are you?" that foreground the social connection of people beyond the transmission function of communication.[10] It applies well to computer or digital contexts, where people often send simple messages of acknowledgement and recognition, like emojis to signal a human connection through remote interfaces; it can also occur in acts like opening a private chat room or closed channel. Phatic communion can be mobilized for political or capitalist purposes. For example, states might appropriate tropes of human connection for nationalist purposes, like showing off democratic discussion as a sign of modernity.[11] Phatic communion can also be leveraged by corporate actors who aim to allay feelings of disconnection by providing direct messages from a CEO or promoting the workplace as an intimate family.[12]

Revisiting the global computer age from this perspective, phatic communion was central to both new corporate-computer regimes premised on greater corporate connection (and thus efficiency and control) as well as ways for employees to connect. Shoshana Zuboff describes this in her classic account of 1980s American corporate computing, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. At one of the companies she studied in 1982, a new bulletin board-like system called DIALOG was installed across the company's offices (the name itself being an allusion to the value of spoken dialog in a text-based system). Workers could initiate their own queries with others in specific "conferences" to propose and resolve work problems asynchronously. Alongside work-related channels, employees created one called the "conference coffee break" which became a virtual social hang-out. On it, workers shared "off-color humor and complaints about the problems of daily work life," narrating it

10 See Zuckerman "Phatic Violence," 295–99, for an overview of the history of the phatic concept and discussion of phatic communion, in particular.

11 See Lemon, *Technologies for Intuition*, 26–29, for a discussion of phaticity in US–USSR Cold War settings.

12 See Wilf, "Phaticity as Technical Mystique," 784, 787, for a discussion of phaticity in corporate settings.

as their own form of workplace "counterculture."[13] Workers at the company also began to play with opening and closing channels to others, shaping their visibility and audience. One closed channel was called "Women's Professional Improvement" and allowed women within the company to build, in their view, their own "old boy's network." As managers became concerned when reports of harassment and the possibility of a women's union were raised, the company began to surveil the closed channels, which quelled most activity and turned many users into idle participants. The company ultimately shut down DIALOG and replaced it with a "more" work-centered system called TONI, or Total Office Network Integration, that would in theory focus on work and work alone.[14] Zuboff's account ultimately reveals how early forms of phatic communion emerged within and alongside corporate software, which allowed office workers to "stay in touch with folks" and to know "it's not just me."[15] The tension between emotional regimes and refuges is evident as workers sought to utilize technological affordances of the system to carve out their own spaces within a changing work environment.

This chapter looks at a longer period of transformations between the regime and refuge of corporate channels in South Korea to understand both the diverse uses of phatic communion across different aspects of computerization as well as how the phatic qualities of different channels evolved with computer technology and organizational practices. The South Korean computer age reveals considerable experimentation with the affordances of corporate-technological interfaces, spaces of refuge, and changing language of regimes over time. I demonstrate how the language of refuge, including metaphors of "open talk," become incorporated into corporate regimes over this time. At the same time, spaces of refuge also derive from the corporate systems they served as an escape from. To do so, I draw from South Korean newspapers, recent secondary literature, and retrospective writing to retrace the emergence of channels and forums used by office workers of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly bulletin board systems (BBS or *PC tongsin*) and corporate groupware. I first look at state projects around automation in the early 1980s to show how idealized depictions of either human–computer connections or human–human connections in corporate networks were circulated to promote ideas of office automation. I then address the first developments of civic networks which appropriated government-created email services into private bulletin board services. These services, which then were commercialized and popularized, were ultimately the first major foray into mass forms of phatic communion within which office workers were significant users. In the third section, I look at the rise of commercial groupware in

13 Zuboff, *Age of the Smart Machine*, 377.

14 Zuboff, 384.

15 Zuboff, 367.

the 1990s and new discourses around democratic office chat that became incorporated into company language. In the final section, I draw on some examples from the 2010s and 2020s to demonstrate how dynamics around phatic communion have shifted in the internet and mobile platform eras while drawing on some familiar tropes from this earlier era.

Office computerization under automation

South Korean popular history conventionally marks 1987 as a landmark year: it is the year the country emerged from almost thirty years of military-led, development-driven dictatorships to transform into a multi-party democracy with greater political and civil liberties and a softening of Cold War hardlines. Before 1987, however, within the military presidency of Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988), important developments were taking place that would affect both computerization and social attitudes toward computerized aspects of everyday life. One can say that both mechanical ideas of automation and new ideas about future society were descending on South Korea via the United States and through the logic of a Cold War race to development.

From the twenty-first-century perspective, it has been commonplace to note metaphors of speed in regard to South Korean capitalist development or its "fast-fast" (*bballi bballi*) culture, yet speed was not a major part of everyday discourse until the 1970s. A growing body of research from South Korean scholars has put the developmental projects of this era into focus to understand how the country was constructed as a fast society.[16] The early 1980s would be marked by discourses promoted by the government around acceleration (*gasokhwa*), automation (*jadonghwa*), and, by the later 1980s, informatization (*jeongbohwa*). Automation pervaded society in the 1980s from broader discourses around time management to everyday technologies and infrastructures like "vending machines, automobiles, elevators, and escalators."[17] Technological advances under terms like "Technopia" and "Computopia" also concretized notions of space-age domestic futures that would be brought about both collectively and through individual efforts. Strong government and corporate attempts to encourage uptake of these technologies as well as shape public affect through awe and wonder were ultimately causally reversed. Public shifts in attitudes toward technological integration could then be seen as

16 See Kim, "Time Technology in Acceleration"; Kim, "Technopia"; Kim, "Science, Technology, and the Imaginaries"; and Jo, "Computopia and Its Discontents."

17 Kim, "Technopia," 236.

the positive (natural) reaction of South Korean society to such (government-led) movements.[18]

Cultural studies theorist Han Sang Kim notes that three types of automation were being promoted by the government starting in 1982: factory automation, home automation, and office automation.[19] Print and television media were marshalled to promote stories about them. There was a travelling trade exhibit showcasing the latest developments in office automation technologies produced by domestic firms. An article in the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper from 1983 on "OA," as it was known, described recent developments for office workers and offered its own prognoses for the future:

> Manager Lee of Company K arrives at work at 9:00 AM, takes out a palm-sized electronic pad from his handbag and presses a key. Following this a friendly greeting, "Hello. We have a lot of documents piling up today," appears, along with a list of documents requiring approval with their urgency levels indicated. Manager Lee's work begins with the guidance of this small pad … This is the appearance of office automation that will appear in the near future.
> … Office automation will undoubtedly bring about a major transformation in the way work is done, with machines taking over tasks previously performed by humans, such as thinking, judgment and planning, and humans moving from simple clerical tasks to focusing on creation and decision-making.[20]

These examples were often compared to what was happening internationally, particularly the United States and Japan, in what was often labelled the "third industrial revolution."[21] One article from 1983 described automation simply as "giving work to robots," which would be "loyal servants," especially in factories. Japan was described as the "robot kingdom."[22]

Though a nationwide electronic mail service would launch in 1984, it is highly unlikely that any of the advanced technologies were operable at the level the article attested. The first electronic mail service was itself in English, as Korean-language

18 This causal reversal has had the unfortunate consequence of shaping much of the culturalist interpretation of South Korean economic development and adoption of technology, relative to others.

19 Kim, "Technopia," 237.

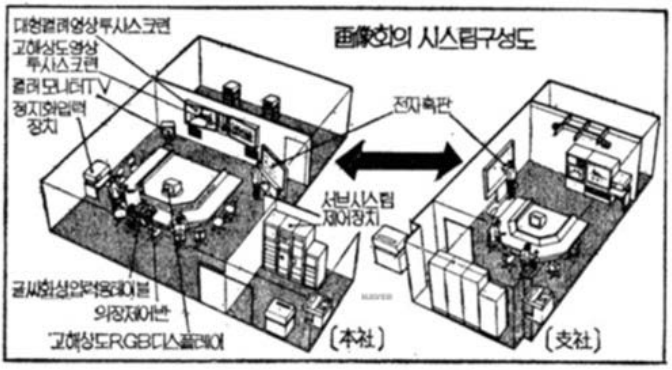
20 "Orders and Inventory Management are Being Handled by Machines and 'Office Automation' is Gaining Attention," *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 4, 1983. All newspapers articles are in Korean unless otherwise noted.

21 "The Flowering 'Third Industrial Revolution'," *Maeil Business Newspaper,* April 10, 1982.

22 "The Beginning of the Automation Wave of the Unmanned Factory Era," *Dong-A Ilbo*, November 5, 1983. Other narratives would come out later that described Japan as highly resistant to computerization, however..

support hadn't been developed yet.[23] Paper-related devices, such as photocopiers, shredders, envelope printing and sorting machines, and fax machines, were becoming more commonly visible. Even the introduction of telephones was described as part of OA.[24] Stories throughout 1984 and 1985 promoted changes in both office layouts and international offices connected through new networks and technologies under development. In Figure 1, a wholesale reinvention of office space for the purposes of virtual meetings was reported, with technologies such as interactive whiteboards and high-definition television panels being promoted. There was no discussion of cost, investment, or productivity but it was likely that the technologies under development were far too expensive to install widely at the time.

Figure 1: A 1984 description of the "Virtual Meeting System Architecture" demonstrating the various technologies that would make virtual meetings possible. These included electronic bulletin boards, color monitors, high-definition video, projector screens, and a virtual text editor.



From *Maeil Business Newspaper*, June 9, 1984. Copyright Maeil Business Newspaper. Used with permission.

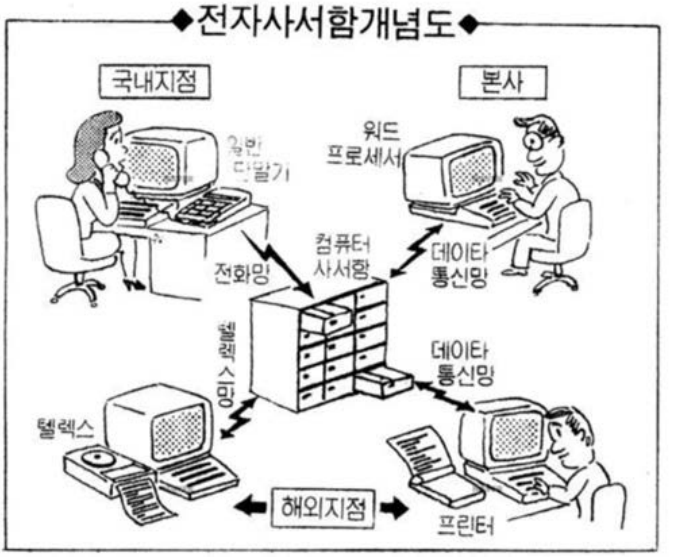
By 1988, a more realistic image (to contemporary eyes) of automation via desks, desktop computers, and email would be apparent in another depiction from the same newspaper (Figure 2). In that graphic, each worker is seated at their own screen, each connected to a "computer post office box" (likely a shared server). Employees are represented individually, each using a computer, but the male workers

23 "The Flower of Office Automation: The Electronic Mailbox," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, November 7, 1984.

24 "In Office Automation, Even the Telephone is Playing a Part," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, June 15, 1985.

are using word processors and printers – producing documents – and communicating from the headquarters or the international branch, while the female work is at the "domestic branch" with a computer and phone that is described as a "regular terminal" (*ilban danmalgi*). A human-less Telex machine also participates in the network. In the same article, the progress of expansion of email services within American companies and services is frequently mentioned (particularly the use of "Value-Added Networks").[25]

Figure 2: "The Electronic Mail Post Office Box Concept." A 1988 depiction of how new electronic mail box will work to connect offices such as the headquarters, domestic branches, and overseas branches via computers, a Telex machine, and telephone networks.



From the *Maeil Business Newspaper*, March 11, 1988. Copyright Maeil Business Newspaper. Used with permission.

Surrounding statements around automation however were somewhat awkward conclusions that automation would not just make South Korea a "developed country" but also help to reduce the working population through efficiency gains. One company was reported to reduce its workforce from 8,100 to 6,100 due to automa-

25 "Electronic Mail Use is Expanding," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, March 11, 1988.

tion developments.[26] By the late 1980s, office and factory automation became common points of dispute for the country's labor unions, as automation came to be seen more as a labor-erasing mechanism than as a step into the future for all workers.[27]

Automation discourses also touched on gender divisions. Descriptions of women's secretarial work at the time describe their work not as being replaced but enhanced by office automation: an article from 1983 describes a secretary (*biseo*) being able to "arrange a meeting among busy executives located across the company, by simply pressing a few buttons and consulting the individual schedules stored in the workstation."[28] The technology for that was reportedly "under development" but imminently arriving. Another describes the secretary and phone both needing to work together to operate successfully.[29] Like other areas of the workforce and other parts of society, such as the domestic sphere, secretarial work was seen to be accelerated or modernized through technology, rather than wholly replaced or removed. One academic study from the 1990s on the impact of automation on secretarial work noted that the role of secretaries would be enhanced under office automation by removing repetitive activities; secretaries would now be "information controllers" in the office.[30] Little attention from news or academic articles at the time addressed fundamentally changing gender roles. Instead, the image of a small team of male workers often supported by one young female secretarial or support worker – still prevalent even which I conducted ethnographic research in the 2010s – would remain as the dominant image of organizations undergoing office automation.

Under early computerization and state-led discourses of automation, phatic communion reflected a certain kind of imaginary at the level of national subjects. That is, while computer devices, industries, telephone networks, and even workers were being "developed" during this time, images of communion helped to draw links with citizens of advanced economies like the United States or European countries which were also developing in the same way, or sometimes with direct links to South Korean projects or companies.[31] It is these abstract national connections that could provide justification for government projects and societal transformations. The idealized landscapes of connection depicted at the individual level, such as men and women experiencing things like email for the first time, were likely showcased

26 "Low-Growth and Automation-Induced Unemployment Are Rising," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, July 31, 1989.

27 "Work Types and Wage Structure Are the Epicenter," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, March 17, 1989.

28 "The Office of the Future – Automated Devices," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, February 8, 1983.

29 "In Office Automation, even the Telephone is Playing a Part," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, June 15, 1985.

30 Chon, "A Study on the Relationship."

31 For example, a newspaper photo caption in 1989 writes "Our Country's Computer Adoption Rate is Falling Behind Other Advanced Countries," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, April 11, 1989, 19.

by the government's telecom corporation DACOM or individual companies as part of their public relations. These depictions concretized the futurity of computerization at the level of the individual, establishing a kind of phatic communion of the individual office worker with technology itself and the work improvements they promised, rather than sociality with their fellow workers. The depiction of idealized individual exuberance around new technologies would continue: in the 1990s, discourses around "informatization" would see children and families depicted as fascinated with home computers as they became newly targeted subjects for realizing state development and encouraging computer markets.[32] Nevertheless, social forms of communion among office workers would change dramatically by the late 1980s and the rise of private bulletin board systems.

Electronic bulletin boards and civic-consumer refuges

Alongside critiques of government development discourse, another set of recent scholarship has highlighted the role of users, citizens, and hobbyists who adopted, appropriated, and transformed new computer technologies in heterogeneous ways in the pre-internet computer era.[33] This scholarship has also cast doubt on the government's oft-credited role in shaping computer practices and accepting national subjects; they note that early users were active in shaping South Korean digital infrastructure and some of its heterodox legacies, including hacking and file sharing.[34] After 1987 and into the early 1990s, newfound democratic freedoms were experienced on free bulletin boards with other users.[35]

Electronic bulletin boards were first developed in the United States under new ideas about stranger-based remote interaction through networked computers.[36] In the early 1980s, hundreds of hobbyist bulletin board systems had sprung up across the US and were starting to attract more attention from corporations and government organizations. Bulletin Board Systems would be hailed as one of the ways an "ordinary person anywhere in the world could be turned into a 'publisher', an eye-witness reporter, an advocate, an organizer, a student or teacher, and potential participant in worldwide citizen-to-citizen conversation."[37] They were a key part of what Kevin Driscoll has highlighted as an important part of the "modem

32 Yang, "Networking South Korea," 742–44. Yang provides a helpful overview of computerization in the broadband and informatization era (from 1995 on).

33 For the role of early user communities see Jo, "Co-Construction of Active Users"; Jo, "H-Mail"; Park, "History and Role"; Kim and Cho, "Formation and Change."

34 Jo, "Co-Construction of Active Users," 34.

35 Jo, "Citizens Digital Culture," 129.

36 Driscoll, *The Modem World*, 14.

37 Rheingold, *Virtual Community*, 133.

world" in which "millions of people were coming online specifically in search of community."[38]

The arrival of BBS systems in South Korea came via a different path but resulted in similar ideas about an independent citizenry self-organizing. Bulletin boards first emerged from attempts to create the national email service, such as H-Mail (or Hangul mail, referring to the Korean alphabet) which was developed by the Data Communication Corporation of Korea or DACOM. DACOM was a government-led public corporation tasked with developing data and information services for state and corporate automation and communication purposes. The email service, however, quickly became popular with independent subscribers who could afford what were at the time expensive devices and high connection fees. Nevertheless, they discovered for the first time the ability to communicate with each other in mass ways, albeit at small scales. Dongwon Jo reports that the first 100 or so users discovered that H-mail could be "utilized … for horizontal and bidirectional communications among themselves – they were even more interested in such collective communicative features as message boards and chat-like electronic conferencing than in private email exchange."[39]

Bulletin boards were not a separate creation by hobbyists but part of the technological affordances of the email system that they adapted. They developed their own electronic bulletin board systems on services like Empal, or Electronic Mail Pal, which allowed the sharing and posting of content on an open forum. By the late 1980s, there were a number of private BBS services, a defining feature of which would be the proliferation of sub-areas such as "forums, chatting, file archives, and so on, which [allowed] users to organize online communities based on their own interests and needs like computer, game, graphic, music, pet, journalism, and so on."[40] At first, private boards were treated suspiciously by the security-conscious government, thinking users might be involved with North Korea.[41] The tenor of BBS usage changed with the democratization movement in the late 1980s. As anthropologist Hae Joang Cho Han noted in 2007,

> people who criticized structural contradictions and raised their self-consciousness moved online first. In particular, the clear expression of intention and information sharing bulletin board culture learned through the 1980s moved online. What's important is that individual opinions, not collectivist voices, were able to pour out like a flood on cyber bulletin boards.[42]

38 Driscoll, 137.

39 Jo, "H-mail," 308.

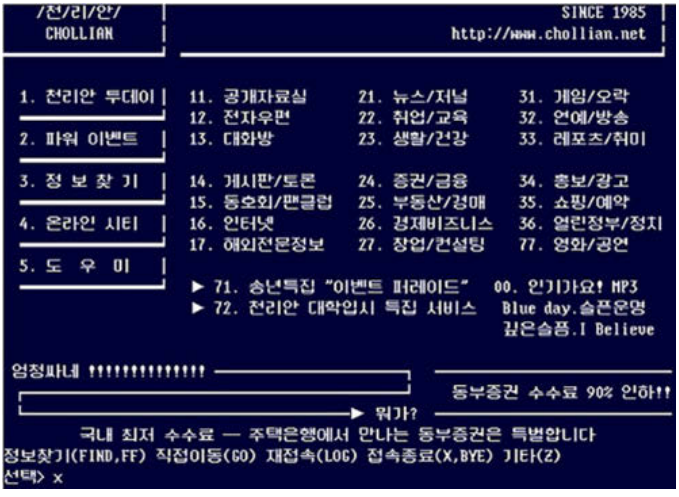
40 Jo, 310.

41 Jo, "Computopia and its Discontents," 417.

42 Cho Han, "Cultural Studies of the Internet Age," 36, quoted in Jo, "Co-Construction," 222.

By the early 1990s, these proto-portal sites had become the main feature by which people used computer terminals or home PCs, with four popular domestic services – Chollian, Hitel, NowNuri, and Unitel – arising during this time. For a brief period of time, the companies operating these services provided the terminals to users to promote the services, following the successful French Minitel model in which millions of terminals were distributed. These were initially free and later changed to monthly fees. By 1989, there was "explosive popularity" for new BBS services, as noted in a report by the *Hankyoreh* newspaper.[43] (One such board was called *Hankyoreh BBS* and scanned articles from the newspaper itself to upload them.) The early 1990s was known as the heyday of "PC communication" (*PC tongsin*) in which users would log on to their favorite bulletin boards via modem, and chat with club members or strangers in simple blue-screen text-based interfaces, as seen in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Common interface of Korean electronic bulletin boards of the early 1990s, known simply as the "blue screen." From this page, users could click through to various other parts of the BBS service, such as clubs, open bulletin boards or information pages on topics like real estate, finance, entertainment, job-hunting, and others.



From "The internet turns 20" Samsung Display Newsroom, August 10, 2011. https://news.samsungdisplay.com/7245.

43 "Private BBS Explosive Popularity", *The Hankyoreh*, August 17, 1989.

BBS services were popular with office workers in a variety of ways. Computer-literate, urban, and consumer-oriented office workers were a target market for many of the services which also hosted and created generic worker sections. One group on the Nownuri platform was created so that office workers could have "a space where [they] can support each other," according to the founding member.[44] The club's membership spanned "all walks of life, from the self-employed to office workers, tax accountants, interior designers, legal advisors, and broadcasting station producers … they not only share daily life information but also strengthen their friendships." The Nownuri platform also launched its own worker-centered poral in the same year, called "Now Business Club," offering "sections such as 'Cyber Salaryman,' which includes news, weather, horoscopes, everyday English, and 'Essential Salaryman Information.'"[45]

As one blog of a former office worker noted, even in 1996, his company did not yet have LAN; they used dial-up modems in the office to search for files via BBS. At home after work, he would join a club on one of his own paid services, the Office Worker's Club. Although it had a dull name, the club members were "all poets and writers," who could "express the joys and sorrows of work."[46] This kind of sociality surrounding bulletin boards is still very present on the South Korean internet today, and, as I suggest further in this chapter, plays a part in how corporate technologies are tailored to civil society norms.

One of the appeals of BBS services was meeting strangers – often of the opposite sex. One newspaper account described how in an "Office Workers Club" two people were chatting about work-related matters and then had an "offline meeting" at a pub in Seoul. "Mr. A and Ms. B tied the knot on November 30th of the same year. On their wedding day, the electronic bulletin board was filled with congratulatory messages."[47] The self-forming qualities of BBS at the time also reflect different social categories by which people could identify themselves online. One of the earliest clubs formed in 1989 was for professionals and office workers. The bulletin board had its own sub-areas, such as worker "vents" (*punyeom*).[48] A 1992 report about increasing women's participation on BBS noted that on one Office Workers Club server, a group of women created their own "Old Maid's Corner" (*nangjabang*), where they could share problems with dating and marriage openly with people in

44 "Nownuri's 'Halfway Begins' … A Meeting Room for Office Workers in Their 30s," *Korea Economic Daily*, September 19, 1996.

45 "'Now Business Club' for Office Workers to be Launched in April," *Dong-A Ilbo*, March 31, 1997.

46 "Communication in 2010 vs 1996," *Epiphany of Babjang* blog, September 4, 2010. https://blog.naver.com/jbob70/120114454492.

47 "'Shall we go on a Blind Date?' Much-Remembered Chollian, Comes to an End after 39 Years," Financial News, July 7, 2024. https://www.fnnews.com/news/202407270641118384.

48 "Worker Clubs," *JoongAng Ilbo*, October 15, 1992.

similar situations.[49] Here, early BBS showed examples of a range of different forms of phatic communion among strangers meeting on the basis of their individual status as office workers as well as shared group identities, such as gender, by which they could self-segregate. Small, exclusive clubs in this regard were particularly important for early stranger-based connections in networked spaces, including separate men's and women's themed groups.

The influence on corporate internal culture and management by increasing practices on BBS usage is difficult to assess. One 1996 news report discussed a corporate slander campaign that unfolded across an open bulletin board advertisement within specific clubs.[50] What we might be familiar with today as digital activism at the time was described as "ant legions" that attacked corporations online. These new powers were causing "headaches" to different companies as they exerted continuous pressure across different bulletin boards. The newspaper reported that employees of industry competitors were likely using different boards to slander each other's companies.

BBS is an important touchstone in the history of South Korean digital culture. It was, as Dongwon Jo has pointed out, first formed from government email systems developed by DACOM intended for corporate users; proto communities of hobbyists were then commercialized by media companies which turned them into mass platform services.[51] Office workers were central to their popularity, both as paying users and as emotional contributors who used it for channeling their sentiments about intensive corporate work cultures at the time. From the point of view of phatic communication, I note that BBS forms of communication, which included structures like chat rooms, email, forums, and specific channels, went largely unnarrated by other institutions; it was the users' own efforts to connect with strangers which generated the stranger-based forms of communion and proved popular for channeling sentiments.

Groupware and the corporatization of democratic sociality

While BBS largely defined the burgeoning civic internet in South Korea in the early 1990s, corporate spaces were being transformed by computer networks and new office productivity software in their own ways. The first wave of this occurred using BBS networking and software within companies, through what were known as "closed user groups" that could have been accessed through Telex terminals, such as

49 "Women's Participation on PC Communication is Increasing," *Dong-A Ilbo*, July 7, 1992.

50 "PC Communication Users [Get] Headaches by Slander Campaigns," *Chosun Ilbo*, October 9, 1996.

51 Jo, "Citizen Digital Culture."

in Figure 2 above.[52] News reports at the time discuss the popularity of the closed company groups which operated on national networks and could link many offices, restricting membership to employees or contractors at a relatively low cost.

However, more significant changes came with the advent of what was called groupware. Groupware was originally an American concept associated with new humanist movements and thinkers in the Whole Earth catalogue, developing as a concept throughout the 1980s.[53] A more technology-specific definition and management-centric function would take hold by the late 1980s. Groupware would become defined, essentially, as any suite of software and technology that included functions like electronic meetings, teleconferencing, telework, electronic mail, electronic flipcharts, and electronic decision-making.[54] These technologies were not just part of technological advancement but accompanied the broader organizational changes that were taking place globally, reflecting the "evolving organization of the future that includes flatter hierarchies, network style, and international flavor."[55] Groupware would become packaged in a commercial software with the release of Lotus Notes in 1989. Lotus Notes had many features, including calendar, email, and a shared database function that would allow teams or organizations to replicate a shared database in different geographic locations.

Groupware also began to take off in South Korea in the early 1990s under the borrowed term *geurub-we-eo*, with both foreign and domestic companies creating new lines of software for corporate users. Alongside Lotus Notes in the Korean market were companies Handysoft which produced HandyOffice and Picosoft which produced a product called Master for Workgroups. Similarly, large conglomerates also began to put out their own in-house groupware packages such as Samsung's Single or Ssangyong Motor's CyberOffice. These all were part of discourses at the time that painted their developments using terms like office automation (*samujadonghwa*), electronification (*jeonjahwa*), and paperless offices (*seoryu obneun samusil*).

Many of the first journalistic accounts to cover groupware in the early 1990s highlighted the great strides which were being made to rapidly transform the office of the nation's "lighthouse companies," large companies that set examples for others to follow. By the mid-to-late 1990s, groupware was being hailed as part of a "new office revolution," both in reference to the new functions and abilities for companies as well as the growth of the internal market, which was forecast

52 "CUG Service Use Surges," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, January 19, 1993.

53 See for example Esther Dyson, "Groupware," *Whole Earth Review* (Fall 1989): 105–108.

54 Robert Johansen's *Groupware: Computer Support for Business Teams*, published in 1988, would largely popularize the idea of groupware that many office workers have become used to today. However the origins of groupware as a concept were more open-ended and not focused on business uses per se.

55 Johansen, "Groupware: Future Directions," 221.

to reach around 600,000,000 Korean won (or around $50 million dollars at the time).[56] Conglomerate IT units that had developed custom groupware systems for internal uses started to commercialize these for others, even marketing them overseas. By 1997, the *Maeil Business Newspaper* would report that competition was already fierce among many companies for the groupware market, particularly as small- and medium-sized companies as well as municipal governments across the country sought to computerize.[57] While newspapers covered the developments of groupware in South Korea, their accounts also reflect a positive view of corporate advances as they could stand metonymically for the development and globalization of the country as a whole.

Beyond assumptions about the general uptake of computers and groupware processes in offices, it is difficult to assess how exactly groupware changed the dynamics of office sociality within companies at the time. An article from 1997 titled "The Wind of Groupware" gives some indication. It reported that "groupware is a software that allows all company employees use the computer network, electronic mail, electronic meeting, calendar management, document management, workflow management, etc."[58] One junior worker at a bank was quoted in another report about groupware as saying that "If you attune closely to the electronic bulletin board, you can get a lot more information than overhearing your boss or coworker. The image of starting work with a cup of tea where everyone chats in the lounge [in the morning] is gradually disappearing."[59]

Discourse about democratic office communication increasing was also evident in the early 1990s. A 1992 column entitled "The Employee" in the *Dong-A Ilbo* noted that computer messaging services as part of groupware could solve a problem in large conglomerates where the distance between upper managers and junior staff was increasing.[60] One of the ways this could be overcome was the new communication portals that allow employees and senior executives to chat. The column reported that at one conglomerate, Kumho Group, "the employees of all of their subsidiaries could directly send complaints or suggestions to the chairman or senior managers using a system known as 'Office Vision.'"[61] Using progress in office automation, the group was hoping to create "direct conversations" between employees and the leadership which would protect individual privacy. At Daewoo Securities, it was reported, at the central personal computer in each office, employees could input

56 "Groupware Leads the New Office Revolution," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, April 5, 1996.

57 "Groupware Market Is Getting Hot," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, June 20, 1997.

58 "The Wind of Groupware," *The Hankyoreh*, June 9, 1997.

59 "Groupware is Changing the Image of the Office," *The Hankyoreh*, November 24, 1994.

60 "The Sawon: Small Voice, Listens Loud," *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 26, 1992.

61 OfficeVision is listed as a proprietary service of Kumho Group, but it was also the name of a major IBM office automation program released at the same time in areas including South Korea.

their suggestions or difficulties which would then be sent to the related managers directly through the bulletin board system. The article reported this as the development of an "internal speech-highway" (*sanae-oenro*).

Thinking through these few examples from the perspective of phatic communion, it is evident that advances in communication between different members of a large organization were meant to soften or warm the more mechanical aspects of office automation happening at great pace with the embedding of groupware in everyday work. It is worth observing that groupware would be both the cause and solution to feelings of disconnect in the new digital workplace. That is, software would change the sense of an organization from face-to-face sociality to a large corporate network bound by devices, permissions, usernames, and larger-scale formal hierarchies. So too could it recreate a sense of intimate connection – in the case above, between the junior employees and upper executives who could now share ideas via a special system which would span their physical as well as organizational gaps via the metaphor of face-to-face talk. This kind of emphasis thus combines both communication and technology together to re-animate the intimacy of office relations – albeit in a rather abstract and hypothetical way often in reference simply to "those above" and "those below" (*wuit-saram*, *aret-saram*). Particular mention about the role of young employees is likely indicative of a greater sense that young workers needed these democratic channels, especially after their important role in democratization protests of the late 1980s. One article from 1992 noted that companies were beginning to change their style, moving from authoritarianism to autonomy in a "consciousness revolution," facilitated in part by new corporate systems.[62] Such narrative refrains would be common even in the twenty-first century.

Corporate discourse at this time was partially parasitic of wider democracy fervor. One new feature that was reported in the mid-1990s about corporate groupware was the *sinmungo* or citizen's petition. Normally something proposed in the civic or political sphere, the *sinmungo* provided the ability to submit online petitions directly to their bosses or executives about changes they would like to see in the office. One company, Samsung SDS, set up a "corner" called "What I hope … to the president," where presumably the president of the company was listening to suggestions as well as complaints. ("Corner" was a phrase used on civilian BBS portals.) A 1992 article listed the various types of "proposal systems" being introduced inside companies, including things like "Door for one's heart," "Idea Man," and "Open Door," as reflections of new interest in computer-mediated feedback.[63]

A 1997 report noted that after one company's bulletin board raised concerns about low salaries compared to others, the company president left a message on the

62 "Towards an Open Society," *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 15, 1992.

63 "Companies Expanding Internal Suggestion Systems," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, May 21, 1992.

bulletin board saying, "We will have the highest salaries in our group in five years."[64] Another account from 1997 described how companies were now seeing themselves as "cyber offices" as they started to expand social offerings, like special-interest clubs, to employees. Employees would form small groups within the company, using the groupware as a place to introduce themselves and share discussions.[65] It is worth noting here that rarely if ever are details given of what exactly workers would actually discuss on the platforms or portals, but it seemed sufficient to note that the existence of the portals as means to communicate would be evidence for the broader public that companies had bridged two contradictory but co-occurring concepts at the time: mechanical ideas of connection through computerization and warm human connections animated by democratic interest, both within a single corporate milieu.

Ongoing dynamics between regime and refuge

In the final section, I turn to some post-millennial developments in the ways that sentiment is channeled at work. My focus here is not to directly trace the development of corporate channels to the present, but to suggest that the poles of regime and refuge are still useful to think with, even as the physical sites, technological means, and practices around phatic communion among office workers have shifted.

A 2006 article in the *Dong-A Ilbo* weekly magazine highlighted the rise of salaryman "refuge" (*suimteo*) websites which had become popular with office workers in the internet era.[66] A number of new websites that touted forums exclusively for office workers were available, including www.salaryman.co.kr, www.cool-life.co.kr, and www.kimdaeri.co.kr (all of which are now defunct). These were reported to have been visited by 200,000 to 300,000 office workers a month. One office worker interviewed described how his routine of visiting the site had integrated directly into his regular work schedule:

> When I get to work, I grab a cup of coffee, sit down, and turn on my computer. Then, I head to the online salaryman website. I check the "Attendance sheet Board" to see who's arrived first, and announce that "Sommer (ID) is here." I click through the news briefing to catch up on major news stories. Then, I head to the "Shout to People" section of the story board to briefly vent my frustrations and even briefly check out the heartwarming love stories that have been posted all night … In that way, browsing the office worker site every morning has become my daily commuting ritual.

64 "Corporate 'Online Petitions' Are Spreading," *The Hankyoreh*, February 5, 1997.

65 "Ssangyong Information's Cyberclubs Are Popular," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, July 20, 1999.

66 "Click! Cyber Refuges, 'Come On In,'" *Weekly Dong-A Ilbo*, April 4, 2006.

As much as a refuge is understood as outside of work and in contrast to official work channels, this example shows how closely it became integrated with work practices and the workplace itself. It also reflects the ways that elements of work had started to replicate themselves through sites, creating quasi-fantasy workplaces on the sites, where employees would check themselves in, read news, and even meet up with other site members in ways similar to a regular company. A CEO of one of the sites described the emotional refuge functions of the sites directly: "I created the site with the hope of providing a space where office workers in their twenties and thirties, who often experience the most 'work overload,' can come together … relieving [their] sighs and joys and sorrows." One key aspect of the sites was precisely to allow workers spaces to vent to each other through dedicated sub-channels: there were titles like "Shout to Somebody," "Shout to Society," and "Talkbox." One psychiatrist interviewed for the article noted that the idea of communion with actual co-workers could backfire and that participating on anonymous virtual channels was reflective of a "desire to find a method of relief for confessing one's pent up inside" (*dapdaphan sok*).

Turning to the emotional regime, in the early 2010s, large domestic conglomerates had started to develop anonymous, internal platforms, perhaps in response to the rise of salaryman websites. The conglomerate LG had something called LGIN and SK one called TokTok (which sounds like "talk-talk"). According to a news report in 2013, TokTok served as an "anonymous bulletin accessible without a log-in process [to] provide a venue where employees can post complaints without reservation and freely suggest ideas about corporate culture and management."[67] Samsung had a variety of messaging and board services across their internal groupware throughout the 2000s, including services like ChatOn, MySingle, LiVE, Family Samsung, or Communicator. The anonymous board known as LiVE was developed with knowledge that employees would not participate if they believed the management was overhearing. A company executive was reported in 2013 saying that "capturing or dragging Web pages with the mouse [wasn't] allowed," to indicate that no one could save or circulate what had been written on the anonymous channel.

NHN, the forerunner of what is now called Naver, South Korea's largest search and portal giant, used mostly in South Korea, was another such company. In the 2010s, NHN had developed its own anonymous internal messaging board which employees used to chat with each other at work. According to a former NHN employee I interviewed, one anonymous message that stated how much the employee liked working at the company for its various perks drew rebuke from an executive. The executive thought that that meant the employees had too much time on their hands and ultimately shut down the anonymous board. Two workers at NHN left the company to establish a replica platform called Blind as an independent, anonymous chat

67 "Companies Using Intranets to Review Criticism, Get Ideas," *Dong-A Ilbo*, February 12, 2013.

application with closed workplace channels accessible via mobile phones.[68] Blind was established in Palo Alto, a demonstrable sign of a refuge from the South Korean legal system and as a signal to South Korean users that the United States would offer more protection for free speech (which was helped by a patented hashing algorithm that kept their identities anonymous from even the platform).

Blind launched in 2013, open only to corporate workers, who were verified with their corporate email addresses. They would receive access to both an open channel for all users and closed channels exclusive to their own companies. These company-marked channels replicated internal electronic bulletin boards. The developer's original communications promised that the platform would "open the voice of the worker" and end "retaliation culture," in which workers were afraid to speak out for fear of being punished.[69] Blind's concept quickly took off as a safe refuge outside of management retribution and led in some cases to public scandals involving *gapjil* ("abuses of power") by a high-ranking executive or leader.[70] In the wake of Blind's success as a corporate refuge platform – with more than 8 million users at more than 300,000 registered organizations in South Korea, the United States, and most recently India – companies have started to respond. Human resources managers I have spoken to on the topic since 2021 have largely tried to move their employees away from using it as its very ephemerality is a challenge to the (supposedly) enduring norms of workplace social relations. They have described how the perceived authenticity of anonymous expression of sentiments – something desired in anonymous surveys conducted by management – is dangerous. One suggested that the long-term impact of such platforms becoming regularized, and not just venues for blowing off steam, would be catastrophic, particularly as anonymity had not led to positive notions of communion but to verbally abusive forms, especially amongst employees within and across companies. In that light, he noted to me by email that "if an application grows with hate, detest, and personal attacks as its basis, I am certain it can never be commercially, or socially successful." Despite this, I have heard of many cases in which executives or owners participate passively in Blind to overhear the intimate confessions of their employees to each other. Another interviewee noted that "CEOs with thin ears are often swayed by Blind and can make wrong decisions."

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68 Interviews with founders on Blind's history (in Korean). https://platum.kr/archives/20043.

69 "Amidst the Popularity of the Office Worker's Anonymous Channel, Blind, Profitability and Stability Remain Hidden Challenges," *The Chosun Economy*, May 6, 2015.

70 For instance, the "nut rage" incident of 2014, in which an airline executive forced a departing flight to return to the boarding gate over poorly plated macadamia nuts, originally broke through Blind by virtue of an employee sharing the details. At the height of the MeToo movement in 2018, an executive at the Kumho Asiana conglomerate was outed on Blind in a significant number of accounts within the company's closed channel.

It is clear, however, that some companies have responded in new ways to mimic the popularity of Blind. In 2018, Samsung SDS, a major IT subsidiary of the Samsung Group, released its anonymous board called TALK with similar features. LG Innotek, another IT service affiliate, did the same with a service called Inno Voice in 2023.[71] A representative at one large conglomerate I spoke to said they tried to minimize Blind's usage by simply becoming more transparent with their management reporting, such as by giving employees the raw data of surveys rather than well-designed PowerPoint reports.

As one newspaper from 2021 notes, companies "tremble" at the thought of Blind, given the threats to their reputations, the circulation of rumors, the leaking of confidential information, and the potential erosion of employee relations.[72] This gives some room to think about the emotional poles constructed by regimes and refuges. If Reddy's classic image of refuge is of a space in which individuals are free to share their emotions outside of societal norms, today's Blind is not just the inheritor of early 1990s BBS groups or even the DIALOG system that was documented by Zuboff in the early 1980s. In some senses, Blind is becoming its own kind of twenty-first-century regime, built up through shifts in media usage, platform expansion, and the propensity for users to attack each other anonymously in mob-like ways (despite its initial intention to move away from such practices). Moreover, Blind has expanded beyond just a work channel: it now hosts hundreds of special-interest channels on consumer and society topics, has its own dating service for corporate users, and has a corporate review section by verified employees, but which companies can also pay to monitor and curate.

While certainly not at the level of a political regime or corporate power, the shift from intimate, protected forms of communion among co-workers to a highly commercialized platform with millions of users is important in two senses: one, as the popularity of Blind grows, its image not just as a site for anonymous talk, but for the possibility of genuine communion, may fade. There are indeed smaller, less well-known channels and platforms that corporate users have started to seek out – as new refuges – to find like-minded anonymous strangers, such as Kakao open rooms and private, closed chatrooms among industry professionals or even friends or alumni groups. Two, it reflects how issues of phatic communion under computerization are dependent not just on the state of technological design but on the broader political economy of technology in which they are embedded. In the 1980s, BBS groups could appropriate private bulletin boards at a time of open-source software, dial-up connections, and the availability of local area networks. In the twenty-first century,

71 "You Upload These Things? Looking at Samsung's Anonymous Board," *Daum Castpic Blog*, September 20, 2024. https://v.daum.net/v/1gEys0e7yM.

72 "Sparks from Blind Fly: Companies Monitor Posts and Block Emails," *Yonhap News*, March 21, 2021.

these dynamics have changed considerably, particularly under platform logics and corporate media control. If phatic communion is arguably a human universal, how it will be experienced, narrated, or appropriated in the future in the realm of digitized work, and how clearly we may distinguish regime from refuge, is an ongoing area of concern not just for analysts but for participants as well.

Conclusion

This chapter has chronicled South Korea's workplace computer age from the perspective of communication channels to understand the importance of relational dynamics in articulating a vision for computerization as well as escapes from it. While minor technologies like bulletin boards or chat rooms are relatively simple innovations in the history of computerization, they nevertheless reveal complex dynamics around the narration and expression of workplace sentiments that are ultimately central to any history of computerization. Emotional control – from new discourses around the fascination with devices to ideas that individuals should adapt themselves to new technologies – is crucial to state or economic projects; however, emotional control can never fully outpace the fact that even simple forms of communion can be created by small gestures of connection (exhibited by the term phatic communion which I have used throughout the chapter). I have shown how phatic communion can be leveraged on both fronts: through the imaginaries created by the state and corporations of new connections afforded by corporate networks and national imaginaries, as well as small-scale forms of spontaneous or ephemeral communion witnessed on private messaging boards or channels that were safe from public scrutiny or managerial evaluation.[73] State, corporate, and media discourses rarely touched on changing gender dynamics witnessed elsewhere around the world, but backgrounded assumptions that the corporate social order would largely stay the same as it was. BBS boards did not necessarily provide a space to radically question these norms, but they did afford spaces for workers to cultivate their own stranger-based connections. Gender separation across sites and channels continues to mark the South Korean internet today.[74]

73 There is a parallel story reported by Sunyoung Yang of satirical phatic connection by online users in the 1990s. Some internet users lampooned government informatization campaigns by showcasing their banal or dull home computer settings, labeling themselves as "freaks," on niche internet bulletin board sites. See Yang, "Loser Aesthetics," 861.

74 Sites and channels today can be described as "male-dominant" (*namtang*) or "female-dominant" (*yeotang*). More recently female-dominant channels have more actively sought to push back against patriarchal social norms. See discussion of Megalia movement in Jung, *Flowers of Fire*, 121–27.

This chapter has largely looked at news accounts from the 1980s and 1990s, which have provided windows onto both discourses of nationalist development and new practices in civil and consumer society. This is by no means a complete account of this time period, and there may indeed be many variations on different kinds of channels, particularly at individual companies or individual "virtual clubs" for office workers (*jikjangin dong-ari*). Many BBS services are now completely offline and their records largely unavailable; likewise corporate records of internal messaging boards may be unlikely to see the light of day without careful access or a keen sense of media archeology on how to reanimate them. This is in some ways a reflection of the nature of phatic communion itself, for which brief, fleeting messages of connection are not meant to be preserved or archived. A next step may be to seek out the personal accounts of office workers themselves who crisscrossed corporate groupware and private bulletin board systems in the 1980s and 1990s to understand their experiences of both. Nevertheless, I have suggested that it is not only fruitful but necessary to think about office place computerization in the context of broader changes in civil computer practice, and vice versa, to think about civil computer practice in the context of corporate channels of communication. Similarly, I have found it helpful to attune to minor technologies of the computer era which are often left out of broader histories of machines and networks. Listening to these channels can help us uncover forgotten connections and re-narrate our own histories of computerization.

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