

**The Public Right to Know:  
Government – Press Relations in South Korea and the Debate about Press Rooms**

**Jukka Jouhki**  
[University of Jyväskylä](#), Finland

**Il-hyun Baek**  
[Seoul National University](#), South Korea

**Abstract**

In May 2007, when the Government Information Agency of South Korea announced the closing of the press rooms on government premises, it marked the end to a significant journalistic tradition. Until then, these press rooms had been integral to relations between the press and government, in that they allowed journalists to be posted full-time in the reporting facilities and in turn establish close relations with their government sources. President Roh argued that his new press policy was a reform that aimed to improve journalistic quality, minimize collusion between journalists and their sources, and establish “clean but tense” press relations. Yet Korean reporters and international press organizations criticized Roh for restricting press freedom and the public’s right to know. This article discusses the political and cultural context of this controversy, and considers the “Roh vs. Press” debate by analyzing public statements, news reports, interviews, and its key rhetorical elements.

**Keywords:** Korean Journalism, Press Rooms, Freedom of Press, Public’s Right to Know, Rhetoric.

**Introduction**

In May 2007, President Roh Moo-hyun of the Republic of Korea (henceforth: Korea), had little less than a year left before the end of his five-year term (2003-2008). Since the beginning of his presidency, Roh’s administration had suffered from inflamed relations with the nation’s three biggest newspapers: “The Kingmakers”, *The JoongAng Ilbo*, *The Dong-A Ilbo* and *The Chosun Ilbo* (henceforth: *The Chosun*). President Roh had had a vision for media reform for many years, and had tried during his presidency to implement it, with poor results. Now seemed to be Roh’s last chance to make a difference, he announced his plan for the closure of the so-called government press rooms, an act that he thought would improve the transparency of the government–media relations and eventually elevate the quality of Korean journalism. However, to the majority of the Korean media establishment, as well as international media organizations, Roh’s plan was seen as a simple restriction of press freedom. Interestingly, both sides claimed and debated the issue from positions that asserted that each were defending the universal right to communicate.

The press rooms that Roh wanted to close are government-built offices for journalists, located in different ministries and government institutions. To compensate for these press room closures, Roh announced that he wanted to centralize official briefings and build new premises for journalists. This, he hoped, would decrease or even end collusion between government officials and reporters, and improve the exclusivist and hierarchical journalistic culture that did not allow entry for members of smaller, less established and online media outlets into the old press rooms. Last but certainly not least, Roh attempted to control the connections between journalists and government officials by requiring journalists make an official reservation every time they wanted to meet a government official.

Roh's act was a significant, if not drastic, change to the entrenched Korean journalistic tradition that had always had reporters stationed in the press rooms on the same premises as their hosting government organization, working almost as colleagues with the government officials who provided them with official and unofficial information for their news reports. Foreign press covering Korea seemed to applaud the reform, but most domestic reporters, newspapers and journalists' guilds attacked Roh with full force. *The International Press Institute* (henceforth: IPI) also condemned the new policy and took the side of Korean journalists against Roh's new policy. Despite all criticism, the policy was put into force in October 2007, and the old press rooms were shut down and new centralized briefing rooms were built in their place. The number of these new briefing centers was lower than the number of old press rooms that had been open before. However, the volume and range of media representatives they now allowed in and could accommodate was greater than before. Still, the new briefing centers were immediately boycotted by the main newspapers.

### **The Question and the Method**

The purpose of the article is to describe and analyze the arguments deployed by the three parties in the conflict. It begins with a discussion of the Roh administration's introduction and justification of the new policy, with a particular focus on the reform's main modes of implementation, namely, the *Government Information Agency's* (GIA) statement and President Roh's explanatory letter to Korea's civil servants. Second, reactions to the policy from *The Chosun*, Roh's fiercest adversary, will be described and analyzed. For this, data was collected by gathering every article from the newspaper's online English site that contained the keyword "press room". Articles were collected for the period between May 2007, the time of initial announcement of the plans to close press rooms, to December 2007, the time of the subsequent presidential elections. Third, the statements of the IPI, the party that developed the conflict into having a global significance will be presented. Finally, the article presents views held by Korean journalists, government officials and media and journalism professors, which were gathered through fourteen interviews. Interviews were open-ended and unstructured, and ranged in length from thirty minutes to an hour. Questions aimed to uncover the opinions of journalists, government officials working as press liaisons and professors in media studies or journalism about the press room controversy. Journalists were representative of all kinds of media, big, small, online and offline, but were all focused on reporting on government organizations. The

government officials interviewed were chosen for their media-related work. Professors were chosen for their special expertise, as they were all media or journalism professors at leading Korean universities located in Seoul.

As it is anticipated that most readers will be unfamiliar with aspects of Korean journalism and the sociocultural and political context of the, the following two sections will provide a brief introduction to Korean journalism, the press room culture and Mr. Roh's presidency. Overall, given the relative newness of the topic to most readers, the present discussion will restrain its theoretical dimensions in favor of its descriptive elements.

### **Korean Journalism and the Press Room Culture**

The revision of the Constitution in 1987 emancipated Korean media companies from strict governmental control and enabled journalists to cover and express opinions on formerly forbidden issues. Political critique was slowly starting to be accepted as a part of Korean media culture. Today, while the media industry has officially been emancipated, the traditions of the authoritarian era still influence media production and journalism. Media companies are still hierarchical and journalists' self-censorship often impedes critical views on political issues. Many Korean journalists still identify with the governing elite of the nation and the largest Korean newspapers are politically oriented. Tom Brislin analyzed the problems of Korean journalism in the 1990s, and identified the following phenomena: the privileged press clubs, emotional news coverage, distorting and misquoting of interviews, referring to non-existent sources, violation of intimacy in photography, uniform reporting concerning governmental issues and the explicit politics of journalists. Indeed, these problems can still be detected in Korean journalism (Brislin, 1997; see also Kang, Kim & Youn 2006; Rhee 2006; Shim, 2005; Kim, Jang & Jung, 2003; Logan, Park & Shin, 2004).

Regionalism with a feudal bent is both a powerful integrating and dividing force in Korea, especially in politics but also in media. Media companies fill the top jobs with people from the home area of the president, which gives the particular company better access to the resources of the ruling party and government. Just as the increasing control over media organizations by big capital control is a phenomenon of concern in other parts of the world, so is it in Korea. This concern, along with worry over the concentration of news-production and lack of diversity, are all hotly debated issues (Cho, 2006; Park et al., 2000, 115-118; Kim, 2002; Choi, 2001).

Physically, the press rooms (*gijashil*) in Korea are large offices provided for a limited number (20 to 40) of reporters by the government for a nominal fee (ca. 50 USD) by the hosting organization. The press rooms usually function as reporters' primary base, as they rarely have desks at their employer's premises. This, of course, means less expenditure for media companies and less moving around for journalists, for whom the press room is the main locus of information. In 2007, a typical press room provided space for reporters from major media outlets, including ten daily newspapers, five TV broadcasters and one radio broadcaster. Representatives of less established, online and foreign news media

were not welcomed in these press rooms. This exclusionary tendency was not officially encoded, but rather was a result of the enforced hierarchy of Korean press culture.

First established during the Japanese colonization period (1910–45), press rooms have since been a full-time facility for journalists of major media outlets reporting on government organizations such as a particular ministry, district attorney's office or police station. Press rooms are also found in major Korean universities and companies. During the military regime that lasted from the independence of Korea after World War II until the end of 1980s, press rooms were integral to the government's strategic policy for keeping the media under control (Kang, 2002; Kim 2002). According to *OhmyNews* (20 February 2004), the leading citizen journalism news service in Korea, the press rooms have long been bastions of journalistic cliques—clubhouses that help preserve the traditional monopoly and oligopoly by media conglomerates and allow for a culture of comfortable connections between individual reporters and their ever so benevolent sources, thereby significantly hindering journalistic integrity.

The perspective held by *OhmyNews* is understandably critical, as at the time it was expressed, they were not given access to press rooms. According to *The New York Times* (13 June 2004), Korean press rooms are not unlike their Japanese press club equivalent, a system which is “an enduring symbol of the collusive relationship between the government and the news media.” Following Laurie Freeman's (1996) discussion of Japanese press culture, Korean press room system could thus be called “an information cartel”. Up until the time of Roh's administration (2003-2008), the Korean press had a closer relationship with the government and was considered akin to a tool for upholding the political status quo, as well as social harmony. Indeed, the government ensured that the press conformed to this role through the use of rewards or force, sometimes both. Reforms introduced by President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) changed government-press relations and as a result it became more conflicted. These ties broke off completely during Roh's administration.. There was “autonomous tension” as the press was allowed and willing to criticize the government while staying autonomous of the political organization (Nam, 2007.)

Interestingly, according to interviews conducted by Nam, Korean reporters often still perceive their own identity as that of another political power, and thus complain about the diminution of cronyist ties. Their fear of being separated from the ruling coalition appears to be an important factor in the confrontation between the Roh administration and the media. Furthermore, reporters from major newspapers feel disrespected because reporters from minor press outlets are treated as their equals by the government. As for freedom of speech, while it has improved and journalists can be critical of the president, it does not matter since, as one reporter notes, “criticizing the president is so common that these types of reports no longer provoke strong reactions” (Ibid, pp. 20-30).

### **President Roh and the Radical Move**

It is generally agreed that Roh Moo-hyun won the 2002 elections because of the outspokenness of Korean netizens and the publication of editorials against conservative candi-

dates by major Korean dailies. “The avalanche of young power” signified a break from the values of the major newspapers who had so significantly defined the nation’s political ideologies. Roh was most popular among young Koreans and acquired an image connoting reformism, innovativeness, anti-Americanism and pacifism (Cho 2002; Hwang 2002, 174-202; Yun, 2002). According to *BBC News* (8 August 2007), with his “relative youth, lowly beginnings and promises to root out endemic political corruption, [Roh] seemed to be the new start the country needed.” However, his term was “a rollercoaster ride,” involving scandals, internal conflict and external criticism. Roh was even suspended in 2004 when the opposition-ruled Parliament impeached him for breaching election rules. The Constitutional Court overturned the impeachment and Roh was reinstated.

Roh did not exemplify the ideal of traditional Confucian leadership that is so strongly favored by traditionally-oriented Koreans. He was born into a poor peasant family, never went to college but self-studied for the bar exam and became a lawyer. In 1988 he entered politics as a member of the National Assembly, “grilling top officials” during parliamentary hearings. When Roh took office in 2003 his cabinet was comprised of politically inexperienced and relatively young individuals (Ibid).

Since the beginning of his political career, Roh had been annoyed by the close ties between government officials and the press, a configuration that existed in part because of poor information policies, but also because of the old journalistic culture that emphasizes the value of personal relations between professionals. During his presidency, Roh attempted to implement some new media policies eradicating what he suspected was a journalistic culture of collusive news-making. However, it was only later in his term that this radical paradigm shift was introduced. It was announced in late May 2007 by the *Government Information Agency* (GIA), which described plans to consolidate the forty press rooms into three centralized spaces at the Central Government Complex in Seoul and two other cities. The “plan for the modernization of media support”, as the President’s Office called it, was also to affect the number of press rooms at the National Police Agency and the prosecutors’ offices (*The Hankyoreh*, 21 May 2007). In President Roh’s view, these press reforms would improve the quality of Korean journalism and would strengthen the communicative rights of the public. Conversely, to the majority of Korean press and several international press organizations it was not a “reform” but a serious restriction of the right to communicate and freedom of press. For example, the new policy required journalists to carry electronic press passes that monitored their comings and goings, and make formal appointments in order to meet with government officials. Hence, the act was a significant change to Korea’s old journalistic tradition, where reporters had worked almost as colleagues with government officials.

The new centralized briefing rooms were boycotted by the main media outlets until Roh was succeeded by Lee in March 2008. During fall 2007, many reporters staged demonstrations against press room closures, and in some cases, they refused to leave the premises even after the government had cut electricity to the rooms. To many, it appeared that Roh was seeking revenge against the conservative press that had always been so critical of him. To others, Roh’s intent was to encourage “clean but tense” relations between

press and the government, in addition to introducing more active and diversified modes of news-reporting.

### **Roh's New Policy against "Parochial Views"**

On May 23, 2007 a Government Information Agency (GIA) press release introduced Roh's new press policy. In it, the GIA stated that after conducting case studies of domestic and overseas situations, an "advanced media support system" was to be established, and "[b]y expanding disclosure of information, transparent relations between the government and the media" would be further promoted. Problems were to be addressed "on the principle of openness, equitability and information sharing to guarantee the people's right to know". The government was to "streamline" the new system by integrating briefing rooms and news transmission rooms. Also an electronic briefing system, as befit the "new environment of [an] information age", was to be adopted. The new briefing centers were to have a more open seating system, allowing representatives outside the circles of the main Korean media organizations to freely access press briefings. Justification for the new policy was also marshalled from abroad, and the new policy pointed out that "many European and North American Governments [also] operate a consolidated briefing scheme tailored to fit their needs". In Korea, central government agencies that did not belong to a major government complex were to discontinue the operation of their existing press rooms and news transmission rooms, "holding instead their briefings in the nearest consolidated briefing center" (*Korea-net News*, 23 May 2007).

In early June 2007, President Roh published an open letter to the civil servants of the Republic of Korea. Roh explained that his aim was to "reform the anachronistic reporters' rooms", "rectify wrong practices" and "hand a better system over to the next Administration". In Roh's view, the isolated reporters' rooms inhibited quality news work. Hence, reporters had to leave the press rooms and "conduct on-site newsgathering activities, meet relevant specialists and study Government policies". Under the old system, reporters were too easily satisfied with material presented during official briefings, the unofficial views of officials and "unconfirmed information floating around the reporters' rooms". In Roh's view, this hindered journalistic competition, caused uniform reporting, and contributed to the shortage of in-depth journalism in Korea. As Roh put it, "[s]uch deep-rooted practices are not easy to eradicate even though everyone has noted the negative aspects" (*Cheong Wa Dae*, 7 June 2007).

According to Roh, the old press room culture was an "archaic practice", whereas the new system would encourage "healthy tension" between the press and the government. This was necessary for an "advanced democracy in an era of knowledge and information". Reporters had started making "unauthorized forays into Government offices again" and journalistic diversity was lost because of the "parochial views hatched" in the press rooms. For Roh, the press rooms compromised the press' objectivity and were symbolic of a bygone authoritarian era. To be sure, foreign journalists "from advanced countries" found it odd "to see Korean reporters spending all their time [...] in a stationery environment" writing uniform reports. His policy conformed to international standards and Ko-

rea was set to follow what was seen to be a global trend. In this way, Roh's reforms were about modernizing both the government *and* the press. (Ibid.)

### ***The Chosun* against the “Lame Duck President”**

In a column in *The Chosun* (28 May 2007) Roh's press policy was called “bankrupt” and an initiative introduced “under the grandiose pretext” of supporting advanced news coverage. It stated that Roh had only a few supporters left and that he previously had unsupported stubborn ideas. Yet in the case of this latest act, the column argued that there was “no justification whatsoever”. It quoted Roh's former supporters and claimed that Roh had “always had an obsession that he is a victim of the press” and claimed that he felt compelled to retaliate against those outlets which were critical of him. Another column, published May 30, 2007 implied that the policy would be reversed, given that everyone but Roh was against it. It argued that the Korean press was not perfect, but that it had nonetheless “progressed in step with democracy” and even “improved its self-corrective mechanism”. Press freedom was a basic element of democracy and should not be “recklessly shaken by a lame-duck president”. According to *The Chosun*'s news report of the same day, Roh was only trying to “gag the press” and did not have the “common sense” to back down, showing the public that he was “bigoted” in his opinions and principles. Indeed, the column asserted that the government had “made war on the press its top priority” and it had “only itself to blame for the tragedy”.

On May 31, *The Chosun* carried numerous news articles and an editorial about Roh. A news article reported that Roh's new press policy was an attempt to offset the president's “lame-duck image and boost the influence of pro-Roh groups”. According to the quoted party members the president was “trying to control the political situation by creating new conflict”. Another news report concentrated on the press policy's inhibition of “the public's right to know” whereas the editorial claimed Roh was facing “increasing opposition from the media, academia and political parties”. It described how Roh was “telling everyone not to mess with him” and characterized his threats as being “fit for gangland”. They pointed out that Roh did not own the government buildings, but that they belonged to the public. It also refuted Roh's assertion that the press did have “special privilege”, and explained that journalists did not meet with government officials for fun, but in order to inform the public.

Hence, the closure of press rooms was “merely the latest manifestation of Roh's stubborn attitude”. Another editorial in *The Chosun* (1 August 2007) continued the newspaper's invective against Roh, arguing that his new policy was “blocking journalists”, and was an “absurd measure” that “will end when this administration ends in a few months.” Indeed, it described the whole reform as the result of Roh's “personal animosity” towards news media. An editorial from October 18th reminded readers how Roh had described the press as “an unchecked, unverified and self-made power” just after stepping into office in 2003, and how he had instructed his ministers not to “wine and dine” the press.

He may have a grudge against the press, but this behavior went beyond the acceptable limits of civility. That is how the five-year relationship between President Roh and the press started, and that is how it will end.

*(The Chosun, August 2007)*

The editorial continues on to discuss how the leaders of democratic countries normally do not berate the press, as they are institutions that represent the people's right to know. That is, if the main duty of the press was to "monitor, check and criticize those in power", Roh's "brutal acts" towards the press were thereby also "aimed at the public". Admittedly, the press had been critical of Roh but it was "because his comments and behavior were threatening to damage the country's pride as well as its future".

### **Global Escalation: the IPI's Involvement**

Roh's new press policy did not go unnoticed by the *International Press Institute* (IPI) a global organization comprised of editors, media executives and journalists dedicated to press freedom and the free flow of information. The IPI is also committed to "the improvement of the practices of journalism". Their first public statement was a letter addressed to President Roh in June 1st, 2007, signed by Director Johann P. Fritz. According to the letter, the South Korean government was setting aside the principles of good governance and accountability. In "modern democratic societies" the media had a duty to hold governments accountable, a role which was now constrained by Roh's recent move. Fritz wanted the Korean government to reconsider and "to once again allow the media open access to ministries and other public institutions".

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, ten days after the IPI statement, the President's Office published a reply, signed by Oh Young-jin, the secretary to the President for Overseas Communications. According to the introduction of the letter on the President's Office website, the IPI had criticized the government's initiative to "streamline the existing support system" for the press. According to Oh's reply, the IPI's concerns were "not based on fact" but based on news articles published by biased Korean press outlets. Moreover, Oh regretted that the IPI did not ask for the Korean government's explanation. According to Oh, "[t]his attitude violates the golden rule for the press: First and foremost verify the facts". Oh also listed the inaccuracies he found in the IPI's statement and explained how the press rooms were observed to be "anachronistic", "exclusive" and rendered reporters susceptible to "colluding on news stories". Moreover, even foreign reporters were not allowed in the press rooms. Oh also referred to the global financial services firm *Morgan Stanley's* desire to abolish Japanese press rooms as they were "symbols of collusion between the press, politicians and government ministries". Oh emphasized that the new system would enable "free competition for quality news", and that under the new policy, the government was not blocking all access to government buildings, but only requiring that reporters make appointments prior to meeting government officials. Indeed, the policy followed the standard set in other countries, where Oh remarked that reporters could not "run about from one government office to another without prior arrangement". According to his letter, the IPI also failed to mention how the new system gave reporters more access to government information, increased transparency, and expanded "the people's right to know".



Oh Young-jin's reply did not appease the IPI, who replied to the letter on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The statement foregrounded the IPI's 50-years of experience, which had taught the organization to "detect elements that threaten press freedom not only in repressive countries, but also within democratic systems". The statement reminded Roh's administration that the Korean Constitutional Court had even revoked one of Roh's earlier press laws, which had been about limiting the market share of media companies. The IPI was particularly worried about the control of interaction between journalists and their sources which would breach confidentiality and inhibit verification of "the PR-like information handed out by the authorities".

The IPI published another statement on August 27<sup>th</sup> when Johann P. Fritz restated most of his views and lamented how the government had used its budget for the new policy. Fritz commented that Roh was "obviously acting in his own self-interest by restricting the media's access in the run-up to the December presidential elections". Moreover, the measures illustrated "a basic animosity against the media and a deep-rooted misunderstanding of the functioning of a free, independent and critical press". President Roh's previous moves were "known in the international media community as being politically-motivated". Again, Fritz urged Roh to withdraw the new system and "to recover the international reputation of Korea in the field of media". Ultimately, Fritz stated that he did "not want to again see South Korea on the IPI Watch List" and spoke on behalf of the Korean public and the international media, who had already realized that Roh's government's "continued hostility towards the press" was "merely another undemocratic effort to prevent scrutiny of those in power".

On November 19<sup>th</sup>, the IPI Executive Board issued a collective statement addressed to President Roh which restated the IPI's concerns. It refuted the claim by the Director of the Korean Overseas Information Service that having interviews in designated places was a common practice in Western countries, according to IPI board members it was not. On the contrary, it was seen as "a retrograde step in South Korea's credibility as a truly democratic country, in which press freedom is protected according to international standards". Also the IPI Board "seriously considered placing South Korea back on the IPI Watch List" but decided to wait for the possible reopening of press rooms by Roh's successor. The IPI also accused the Korean government of encouraging its ministries and agencies to counter any critical media organizations, monitoring government advertisements in critical dailies, and having a tax-money based support system for the media they favored. The IPI further condemned the government's two major media laws and selective tax probes of media companies, and criticized their "staged attacks" against critical media reports. The statement concluded by restating its demand for Roh to "remove the new restrictions against the journalists" so that Korea's "reputation as a democratic country" could be reinstated in the international community.

### **Behind Official Rhetoric**

According to one Korean newspaper reporter interviewed for this article, the "so-called reform" was about Roh's government wanting to control the negative reporting of the

major newspapers. The reporter suggested that restricting the reporter – civil servant unofficial relationship would be counterproductive as both sides valued the informal connections. This kind of bonding with favoritism goes back to Korean culture where old and steady social ties and long traditions of co-operation are valued. Before the new policy, the reporter remarked, it was easier for government PR staff to gather all the reporters into press rooms, but in the new situation it was too much trouble to gather all reporters together in the new briefing centers. Also, the smaller media, although they were now allowed in the briefings, were bound to “lose out” in the deal anyway as they did not have any power or valuable contacts. On the other hand, he said the press’ claims about the “people’s right to know” being jeopardized was an overstatement, that even the public did not believe this argument. In reality, the conflict was more about reporters being “inconvenienced”, and their appeals to the “people’s right to know” was just “lip service”. That is, the flow of information was not jeopardized, since journalists still had their old sources in the government. According to this reporter, it was ultimately wrong of the press to have resisted the government’s new policy.

Another Korean newspaper reporter interviewed said there was nothing “progressive” in the new press policy and the press should not have been “oppressed”. The press could reform itself but the government was arrogantly forcing the policy and in doing so, was infringing on the people’s right to know. In contrast, another reporter interviewed for the article thought that some of the major newspapers had indeed practiced biased reporting, and that Roh was accurate in his view about press being unfair towards him. In other words, the Korean press “deserved” the new policy and needed “clear channels and gate-keeping”. One interviewee, a Korean broadcasting reporter, underscored the practical elements of news-making as he lamented how difficult reporting had become after the new policy. He explained, “so many reporters from internet media are contacting the sources. Then the sources get tired of dealing with them and feel more pressured when meeting me”. One unfortunate outcome of the “so-called reform” was that drinking parties between government officials and reporters had become rare, said the reporter. To be sure, one government official interviewed seemed to miss the same good old days:

In the past we tried sustaining good ties with reporters. Then we could persuade those reporters about the direction of the article a little bit. Now it’s difficult. Drinking and having lunch and dinner were our duties and now it’s gone away and we have to find a new way dealing with media.

Another government official interviewed in this research stated that reporters’ arguments about the right to know being infringed were “nonsense”. As he put it, reporters were merely inconvenienced and would just have to get accustomed to the new policy without exaggerating the circumstances. He also claimed that the public did not agree with the journalists, who would eventually have to obey the government. This was what the polls suggested. One GIA official interviewed said that he thought the reform had been successful, particularly because the representatives of smaller media outlets, such as the online-only media reporters, were now getting information more easily. They were allowed into briefings and had their own press cards. However, an interview with his colleague uncovered concerns that civil servants were having difficulties in expressing their

personal opinions to the press and meeting the reporters. Specifically, it was felt that the GIA was watching individual officials and would reprimand any over-talkative officials. “So I don't want to say a word to the press”, the official stated. Another government official interviewed thought the reform was politically motivated and would most likely be cancelled after a regime change.

Most of the professors interviewed for this article were more understanding about Roh's policy. One professor of media studies described the press room reform was a positive thing – despite Roh's own motives – in that it was a step away from the passive culture of the old press room system. Yet according to a reporter with an English-language newspaper in Korea, many people held a mistaken image of press room reporters. They did not just sit around and wait for press briefings, but were more active than people thought. However, there was indeed an unspoken rule that reporters from the major newspapers were not free to write pro-Roh articles.

An interview with an American journalist residing in Korea highlighted how friendly relations between journalists and officials did sometimes lead to the exposure of political scandals, but also had a downside. For example, if government officials made mistakes, their journalist friends might not report these, because of a sense of loyalty. In a similar vein, a professor of journalism interviewed at a university in Seoul expressed his appreciation of Roh's reform, because of the likelihood that it would result in a more open system, which would in turn eventually lead to improved press freedom. On the other hand, the press should have introduced its own reforms, but it did not seem too motivated to do so. In this professor's view, the conflict was rooted in the different ideologies held by the dominant press and President Roh. In the end, the only way of improving Korean press culture was to improve the way journalism was taught in universities. Specifically, a greater emphasis on issues around gatekeeping, more focus on methods of objectivity, and much more teaching around investigative journalism. However, this professor did not see any significant difference between the old and the new system. In his view, the new system had only produced more physical space for journalists. Moreover, the government had the natural right to restrict the use of its own premises, since press rooms were situated on government property. As he saw it, journalists were misguided in their tendency to think that they owned press rooms, simply because they had occupied them for the last fifty years. The third professor interviewed was the most laconic in his view. With a personal background in journalism, he was in firm opposition to Roh's reform. He did not see any shades of gray in the matter, and stated that there was nothing good about the new policy, and viewed it as a measure that only restricted press freedom. To him, limiting reporters' access to government officials meant less information about the wrongdoings of the government.

### **Discussion: Never-Ending Negotiation**

According to Kang Myungkoo, Korean media is a “power exerting institution, rather than power-watching one” and “has become an invested interest group like the military, the bureaucrats, and the party politicians, rather than a professional occupation”. After President Kim Dae-jung stepped down in 2003 there have been “unprecedented conflicts” be-

tween the media and the government and also within the media. “Allegorically, journalists who are supposed to report soccer matches, have decided to participate in the game due to their dissatisfaction with the players.” The official and unofficial networks between journalists and politicians contribute to the “over-politicization” of journalism. Moreover, the “authoritarian, didactic, and patronizing relationships with their readers” had failed to create “an egalitarian public sphere wherein everybody participates in discussions” (Kang, 2007, p. 159-70.).

Michael Breen, a British columnist in Korea, has pointed out that although the new policy was introduced in a rude way, one has to be careful when “the media themselves become a story” and when they own the means of production (*JoongAng Ilbo*, 18 June 2007). All sides of this conflict seem to have been working for the noble cause of improving the right to communicate, better journalism, and enhancing the public’s right to know. However, the public was far from unified in their alignment with either side. According to a poll conducted by *The Dong-A Ilbo* (1 June 2007), over half of the respondents did not agree with the new press policy but over one third did agree, as they believed the new policy would improve what they perceived to be an old-fashioned press culture. Surprisingly, internet-based polls produced even more support for the reforms. In the website polls conducted by *Naver*, Korea’s leading internet portal site (5 September 2007), and the public service television company *KBS* (19 June 2007), the majority of respondents agreed with Roh’s policy. Perhaps this was because the average Internet-user in Korea is young, less conservative, and thus more likely to be pro-Roh, as well as more critical of the kind of traditional journalism practiced by the leading newspapers.

*The Chosun*, the IPI and the Roh administration all referred to Korea’s global status and compared its situation to “advanced” countries to get support for their arguments. In public discourse, both *The Chosun* and Roh accused the other side of restricting the public’s right to know. Yet in private and conditions of anonymity, reporters and members of Roh’s administration had numerous dissidents who deviated from their side’s collective public rhetoric. In all, it seems quite obvious that both Roh and the press were significantly biased despite their reliance on lofty ideals and rhetoric of objectivity, as well as their supposed interest in defending “the people”. Both sides also used the tools they had in questionable ways. On one hand, the press rallied sympathy under the banner of freedom of speech, but still attacked Roh with biased reporting. On the other hand, Roh used his administrative power to retaliate against the press, namely by restricting their access to government premises and sources. This conflict could be seen as a manifestation of the functional dynamic between government and journalism in Korea, but in this case of “Roh vs. Press” the conflict escalated *beyond* Korean press and political culture when the IPI got involved. Interestingly, the IPI seemed to have some trouble distancing itself from the position of being merely another interest group in the matter. It interpreted the new policy as restricting free flow of information but did not investigate the particular context of Korean press culture, nor did it consider how much its traditional press room culture might have restricted the information. After all, improving general practices of journalism is one of the reasons the IPI was established. In the Korean case, the IPI stood behind the newspapers and journalists but not necessarily behind journalism itself.

As William F. Birdsall has discussed, the right to communicate is one that is hard to define and a highly abstract concept and thus should be related to as an “open work” affected by local diversity and interpretation. Instead of a universal definition, he suggests a country or culture-area specific articulation of the right. In the Korean case the right is indeed an “open work” and even if we lay aside universal definitions, it is almost impossible to arrive at an agreement even on a national or cultural level, given that the values revolving around the right to communicate and especially the rhetoric communicating those values are ambiguous and manifold. If not a Manichean dichotomy, they indicate a constant and inflamed negotiation process with little promise of a unified or even an affirmatively sincere voice. On the other hand, as Birdsall notes, it is ambiguity that allows a right to become universal (2006, 1-5). On the rhetorical level the press and Roh both shared a mutual respect for the right to communicate and the freedom of the press but interpreted or chose to use a strategic interpretation best suited for their agendas.

In the end, press freedom, freedom of speech and the right to communicate in Korea appear to be faring quite decently in 2007. For example, *The International Herald Tribune* (6 June 2007) characterized Korea as “one of the most uninhibited Asian democracies, where editorials in newspapers routinely call the president psychotic”. It is a colorful example of free press with the courage to use the freedom of speech, or as Dakroury (2005) interprets John Stuart Mill, the right to communicate is realized in the individual’s ability to criticize a corrupt government. On the other hand, perhaps this same discussion over rights should sometimes be turned around to center around the question of how much of a right a *government* has to criticize a corrupt or otherwise bad *press*. For example, conglomerate media ownership, as discussed by Dakroury, or outright immoral or low-quality journalistic practices, may well violate one’s right to communicate just as much as oppressive governmental institutions. This is of course a matter of defining the right. In practice, both the Korean press culture and the government had a myriad of issues that could have been improved. Obviously, both sides had done their part to create the conflict and no unilateral solution would be satisfactory. Overall, it appears that the dynamism of the two opposing sides and the negotiations about what is the right (way) to communicate and the freedom of speech is a never-ending process steered by fluctuations in discursive hegemony, shifts in power relations and, in the end, choices by the Korean citizens as readers, voters and *the public*.

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## About the Authors

**Jukka Jouhki** (PhD) is a scholar of cultural anthropology in Organizational Evolution and Dynamics Interdisciplinary Research Group at University of Jyväskylä. His research project (2006-2009) is funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation in Finland and concentrates on different aspects of Korean media culture. He can be reached at: The Department of History and Ethnology, P.O. Box 35 (V), FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland. E-mail: [jukjouh@campus.jyu.fi](mailto:jukjouh@campus.jyu.fi)

**Il-hyun Baek** (BA) is a journalist working for JoongAng Daily and a graduate student at the Department of Communication, Seoul National University. Currently she is working on her master's thesis focusing on the controversy following President Roh Moo-hyun's new press policy. She can be reached at the Department of Communication, Seoul National University, Gwanak-gu, Sillim-dong 56-1, Seoul 151-746, South Korea. E-mail: [annn3@hanmail.net](mailto:annn3@hanmail.net).

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