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# Digital Voice and the Future of Industrial Relations

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## I. Concept and Theoretical Framework

### A. Digital Voice

The phenomenon of digital voice refers to “the voice of workers expressed online without passing through traditional offline channels, and various individual activities and collective actions triggered by it”.

### B. A Theoretical Framework to Interpret Digital Voice

Through exit–voice theory, transaction cost economics, and network theory, it is possible to examine the voice of workers expressed through digital voice channels, the emergence of platforms that mediate the phenomenon, and the formation of loose solidarity that drives the phenomenon.

In exit–voice theory, digital voice can be seen as corresponding to “voice” that generally encompasses protest. It is not “exit” from the organization through such means as resignation, nor is it “neglect” of job duties, nor is it “loyalty” meaning that workers silently endure difficulties and wait for the situation to improve. Rather, it is “voice” in the sense that it can lead to multiple individual activities and collective action, as workers voice issues through online forums.

From the perspective of “communication cost economics,” which expands the thought experiment of transaction cost economics, the digital voice platform allows subscribers to freely write and comment on online forums, which will be recorded and stored on the server managed by the platform. In other words, compared to the chaotic public sphere, the effort required for communication is handled by the digital voice platform, thus internalized and drastically reduced

by it. The Blind App is an example of this.

Network organization theory shows the potential for loose solidarity in which digital voice channels and platforms can sprout. In the public sphere, an online community based on a kind of loose solidarity can be created by individuals gathering and communicating on online forums through the digital voice platform. Using the metaphor of the square and the tower (Ferguson, 2018), this is not a square of disorderly communication, nor a solidly structured communication tower such as labor unions, labor-management councils, and HR systems like corporate grievance procedures. Rather, it can be seen as a network. Numerous individual activities and collective actions emerging from digital voice platforms such as the truck protest by Starbucks Korea employees (2021) and the Blind App are born with a network of loose solidarity between individuals.

Digital voice mobilizes or bypasses the resources and networks of institutionalized labor and management organizations. Digital voice also gives birth to institutionalized labor organizations. In the process, it is sometimes incorporated into the existing order or takes its own route. In other words, it can be seen as a phenomenon that implies the possibility of “organizing” in various ways.

## II. Young Generation and Digital Voice

The young generation actively accesses online space, but expressions of opinion such as making remarks in online space are mainly for a specific minority, and in particular, work-related remarks are made only by a specific minority. When compared to specific questions related to trust in other individuals in offline space, trust in others in online space has generally been found to be

similar, with neutral (average) 40%, negative 40%, and positive 20%. In other words, it can be seen that there is no significant difference between the overall trust in others in offline and online spaces.

### A. Experience and Perception Towards Blind

#### 1) Availability of the Blind App

Disparities between companies are evident, with companies with 300 employees or more (66.7%), companies with 30~300 employees (33.5%), and companies with less than 30 employees (12.2%).

#### 2) Signing up for the Blind App

Among the young generation, it can be seen that employees of large corporations, university graduates, and males hired through open recruitment who belong to the primary labor market sign up for the Blind App at a higher rate than employees of small businesses, workers hired through non-open recruitment, and females.

#### 3) Use of the Blind App (Access and Expression of Opinions)

Males, college graduates, and workers hired through open recruitment tended to use the Blind App well in terms of access and expression of opinions, and it can be inferred that young people working for medium-sized firms express their opinions more actively than those in large companies.

#### 4) Degree of Trust in Other Users in the General

##### Lounge and the Company Lounge in the Blind App

The degree of trust in other users in the general lounge and the company lounge in the Blind App can be seen as roughly equivalent to the degree of trust in other people in general offline and online spaces.

#### 5) Degree of Trust in Information and Communication of the Blind App's Company Lounge

In terms of trust in the information and communication of the Blind App's company lounge, women and those in their late 30s are very interesting groups. They have a high level of general trust in company lounge's information and communication, and a high rate of affirmation that company lounge's communication provides more meaningful information than corporate HR organizations, executives, and superiors. On the other hand, males, those in their late 20s, employed in large corporations, and the group hired through open recruitment tended to have a high rate of affirmation about the significance of the information provided by the company's HR organization, executives and superiors.

Why? It can be hypothesized cautiously that males in their late 20s who are employed through open recruitment and working at large corporations are generally well integrated into corporate communication lines and channels, thus likely to obtain a lot of meaningful information, but women in their late 30s tend to be excluded from these official and unofficial lines and channels, thus less likely to obtain meaningful information.

#### 6) Prospect of Participating in the Blind App

Workers of medium-sized companies, university graduates, and workers in their late 30s, and men tend to have a stronger willingness to participate in online communication than workers of large companies, people in their late 20s, and women.

Workers of medium-sized companies and men in their late 30s tend to have a stronger willingness to participate in offline communication than workers of large companies, people in their late 20s, and women.

Workers of medium-sized companies, people in their early 30s, males hired through open recruitment tend to have a stronger willingness to participate in offline actions than workers of large companies, people in their late 20s, those hired through non-open recruitment, and women.

The variables that consistently stand out in the three questions related to the prospect of participating in the Blind App are gender, age group, and company size. There is a clear contrast between the groups of workers of medium-sized companies, workers in their late or early 30s, and males and the groups of workers of large corporations, workers in their late 20s, and females. Judging from the active use of the Blind App by young people working for medium-sized companies in terms of the frequency of access and expression of opinions, it can be seen that they are highly willing to participate in online communication, offline communication, and offline action when a problem occurs within the company. The Blind App lounge is the most widely available in large companies, and young people working in large companies sign up at a higher rate than those in small and medium-sized companies but they show a passive attitude about participation. The reason for such a passive attitude can be carefully hypothesized to be related to anonymity in the crowd or trust in information provided by existing HR, executives and superiors.

### III. Vitalizing Digital Voice Channels and Labor Unions

So how does the vitalization of digital voice channels relate to labor union organizations and activities? This was analyzed in two ways. First, by examining why and how workers use digital voice channels, we attempted

to analyze how it affects the activities of existing labor unions and the establishment of new unions. Second, by exploring how existing labor unions utilize digital voice channels, we analyzed cases where they expanded new organizing possibilities or made attempts to change the existing ways of activity. This is because, with existing studies, it was difficult to confirm how organized labor accommodates individual voices online in the reality where voices of individual workers through digital voice channels are spreading. This study examined how efforts to vitalize digital voice channels, such as the Blind App, affect labor unions and how labor unions perceive and utilize these speech channels. The summary of the research findings is as follows.

First, workers utilized the Blind App, a space of anonymity that allows people to connect without leaving the organization, to express complaints and grievances that they have while working, as well as to acquire and share information on career development, wages, and working conditions. These individual activities were used as resources for organizing offline labor unions depending on the issue, and also led to the triggering and actual organization of collective action as confirmed in the truck protest by Starbucks Korea employees. What is interesting is that the Blind App, a collective space for voices expressed online, is also being used as an area for personnel and labor management. It allows the checking and monitoring of various dissatisfaction, grievances, and perceptions that are difficult to know within the organization on the one hand, and on the other hand, it serves as an opportunity and medium to develop new personnel and labor techniques. From the latter point of view, not only the relationship of digital voice channels with labor unions, which is examined in this study, but also their relationship with corporate personnel and labor management can be said as a

subject that requires research.

Second, the viewpoints of labor unions towards digital voice channels or about using them were ambivalent. First of all, in terms of utilization, the strict guarantee of anonymity could conversely become an obstacle to union activities which depend on free communication in physical places where actual labor is performed (such as offices and factories). This is due to the fact that the negative perception of union activities is relatively high in Korea, and the word “labor union” is associated with a negative image especially among young white collar workers so they may be reluctant not only to engage in union activities in public, but also to disclose their labor union membership. In this respect, there are cases in which union membership applications are received privately without notifying the company. Also, some continue their activities through online channels after forming labor unions offline.

From the perspective of passive understanding, it is seen that there are limitations in terms of stability and sustainability because raising a voice through a digital voice channel is temporary and is not carried out in a way that exercises the conventional rights of labor under the Constitution. However, it is understood that this perspective stems from limiting the scope of representation of labor unions to “members” and narrowly interpreting collective bargaining or collective action as acts under current labor union and labor-related laws.

#### **IV. Digital Voice in Online Platform**

Next, this study attempts to answer the following question: “What processes do online platform workers go through to organize a digital voice channel, share

complaints and create a sense of solidarity through it?” To this end, we focused on online crowdworking platforms, which have objective and subjective conditions in which it is extremely difficult to form social relationships among workers. It was confirmed that, despite such conditions, online crowdworkers have recently begun to raise collective voices and sprouts of solidarity have emerged among those workers, and this study analyzed a series of “processes” that appeared based on the data collected over many years. We confirmed that the formation of social relationships and of collective voice channels among platform workers are closely related to the development stage of the industry as well as the personnel management strategy of the platform company to which they belong.

During the formative years of the data industry supported by online crowdwork, workers—literally individualized and fragmented—flocked to the platform, attracted by the charm of not needing to establish social relationships. The emergence of a budding social relationship between workers during the growth period of the data industry was largely attributable to the management method of the platform. Platform companies raised entry barriers for participating in projects that can generate income through policy. This increased workers’ dependence on the platform, and at the same time they had a common complaint about information asymmetry between themselves and the platform. Meanwhile, front-line platform managers utilized real-time online communication channels such as group chat rooms to efficiently manage physically separated workers and increase productivity. As a result, “productive social relations” emerged. Lastly, the rise of a group of full-time platform workers became more evident in the era of data industry advancement. They themselves organized public forums such as online open

chat rooms and online cafes as a fundamental solution to the problem of information asymmetry. Such online public spheres have recently been shown to act as a trigger for online collective action beyond enabling information sharing, which was the initial goal.

These results have theoretical implications in that they have overcome the limitations of previous studies, which mainly dealt with organization from the top, centered on labor unions, and started a discussion on the process of forming collective interests from the bottom by online platform workers. In addition, it provides practical implications for labor unions by shedding light on the heterogeneity within the worker group, which is amplified by the management techniques of platform companies.

## V. Implications of the Study

What does this series of research suggest? Why is the phenomenon of digital voice, which refers to the voice of workers expressed online without going through traditional offline channels and various individual activities and collective actions triggered by them, emerging today?

If the last century was the age of membership, this century is the age of access. Traditional industrial relations, born from institutionalized labor-management dynamics, have been made up of collective actions and responses based on a strong sense of belonging. However, it is believed that this age of such a sense of belonging will soon be over. It is difficult for young workers to find a place to work for a long time with a strong sense of belonging in the midst of great changes in the labor market, symbolized by the end of massive open recruitment and of lifetime contracts.

The diversification of employment contracts and the fragmentation of tasks and duties are making the borderline between labor and capital opaque and unclear. In other words, the traditionally dualized confrontational structure of labor and management will become more blurred with the rise of platform companies.

With this trend, it is expected that weak connections and loose solidarity will emerge more often and more easily than collective actions based on a strong sense of belonging. In an era where changing or leaving jobs is very frequent, weak connections based on occupational identity rather than the fence of a company will become more important to young workers. In other words, as the age of belonging fades away, the age of access will emerge. In that sense, the digital voice phenomenon is also a preview of the macroscopic changes that will occur in the field of industrial relations. It is the reality that has closely approached us and the future that has

already arrived.

Based on these predictions, the rise of weak connections and loose solidarity is both a great crisis and an opportunity for institutionalized industrial relations and standardized labor and management organizations. As discussed before, the digital divide between and within generations will emerge as an important issue surrounding the accessibility of online/digital forums in the digital transformation (DX) of industrial relations. In addition, not only the problem of expanding or amplifying the existing offline labor market's dual structure and gap issue to the online space, but also the problem of confirmation bias of public opinion that is prominent in the online/digital space, such as the echo chamber effect, will also emerge. Depending on how institutionalized industrial relations and standardized labor-management organizations, like giant dinosaurs, respond and adapt to these environmental changes, they may face great risks or great opportunities.

## References

Ferguson, N.(2018), *The Square and the Tower : Networks, Hierarchies and the Struggle for Global Power*, Penguin Books.