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Inquiring into Activist Publics in Chronic Environmental Issues:

Use of the Mutual Gains Approach for Breaking a Deadlock

## Abstract

This study tests the usefulness of Ni and Kim's (2009) typology of publics in understanding different publics' communicative behaviors for problem solving surrounding an oil spill issue in Korea. Specifically, it explores the differences between chronic activists and other types of publics who were affected by this chronic environmental issue. A total of twenty-four interviews were conducted from which five different types of publics were identified. The findings suggest that the majority of activists who are currently working on the issue are closed-chronic activists, which shows slightly different results from Ni and Kim's findings on chronic activists' communicative behaviors. Interviews were also conducted with five communication experts to propose viable conflict resolution strategies for the issue. The mutual-gains approach is recommended as a viable organization-public conflict resolution strategy. (128 words)

*Keywords: chronic activist publics, conflict resolution strategy, mutual-gains approach*

## Inquiring into Activist Publics in Chronic Environmental Issues:

## Use of the Mutual Gains Approach for Breaking a Deadlock

Organizations operate with their own mission and goals. These include basic goals such as survival and profitability as well as relational goals such as fewer conflicts with publics and building favorable organization-public relationships. These relational goals are especially critical for organizational effectiveness (Grunig *et al.*, 2002), and public relations has been acknowledged for its role in contributing to these relational goals. However, in reality it is common for organizations and their publics to have incompatible goals; as a result they encounter conflicts that are often long lasting. In this backdrop, Plowman and his colleagues (1995) suggest that public relations be redefined as the “management of conflict between an organization and its important stakeholders” (p. 238).

Practicing public relations as conflict management requires organizations to select their conflict resolution strategies very carefully so as to minimize conflicts before they escalate (Plowman *et al.*, 2001) or to end the stalemate in negotiations with angry publics. Several scholars have pointed out that how organizations perceive conflicts and pressures from their environment and publics determines what public relations strategies organizations formulate to meet their goals (Grunig, 2009; Vujnovic, 2004). For example, some organizations resort to image-focused strategies to protect themselves from publics’ negative behaviors rather than to protect their relationships with publics. In contrast, other organizations proactively seek strategies that align their goals with the interests of publics who are affected by their behaviors and decisions, which in turn allow them to make more responsible decisions (Grunig, 2006; Grunig, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2007; Kim & Ni, 2010).

We believe that using public relations strategies as conflict resolution strategies or problem-solving strategies for organization-public relationships is one of the most significant areas of research that deserve more scholarly attention. Because conflict occurs when an organization and its publics do not understand or accept each other's interests and concerns, public relations strategies for problem solving should be executed based on the mutual understanding of concerns and behaviors between an organization and its publics. It is important to acknowledge that publics can also use public relations strategies to resolve issues that affect them (Kim & Ni, 2013). Hence public relations strategies as problem-solving strategies should be viewed from the perspectives of both organizations and publics.

Previous research in public relations has focused on symbolic relationships (Grunig, 1993) and messaging strategies (e.g., Hazelton, 1993), and has been organizationcentric. For example, although Werder (2009) attempted to link public relations strategies to publics by analyzing how effective message strategies were in influencing publics' situational perceptual responses, her study focused on organization-oriented strategies that lack an explanation of why and how publics behave in a certain way, what problem-solving strategies publics use to resolve the issue, and what strategies should be used to narrow the gap between the two parties' stances on the issue.

Therefore we believe that it is important to understand the different types of publics and their problem-solving behaviors in a conflict *before* proposing public relations strategies for conflict resolution. There are several studies on the typology of publics (e.g., Kim *et al.*, 2008; Hong *et al.*, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2012) that differentiate the different types of publics. However, there is still relatively little research on the different types of activist

publics and their communicative actions for problem solving. McCown's (2007) study is one of the few studies that focuses on specific types of activists and their problem-solving strategies, and explores how internal activists utilize strategies to narrow perceived communication gaps.

We found Ni and Kim's (2009) typologies of publics useful in understanding the different types of publics and their communicative behaviors in controversial or conflicting situations. Their typologies are developed based on the assumption that both an organization and its publics are problem solvers in a conflict. Their work was significant in informing scholars of the benefits of understanding publics' behaviors, such as why they are either open or closed to a problem-solving approach, why they communicate proactively or reactively, or why they stop communicating about issues that affect them. By understanding the different problem-solving approaches or public relations strategies that diverse publics utilize, organizations can better develop more realistic and practical strategies so that both parties can bridge the gaps in their positions.

We believe that it is worth examining whether Ni and Kim's (2009) framework of public evolution can be applied to a different cultural setting. Because Ni and Kim's (2009) conceptualization of the evolution of publics had some limitations (i.e., interviews were conducted at one university in the United States and hence most participants were students), we can further examine the evolution of publics in an issue over time by applying their proposed configurations of publics to an issue that has affected a larger population.

This study aims to provide a better understanding of activist publics and their behaviors regarding a chronic environmental issue in South Korea, and to suggest a public

relations strategy as a problem-solving strategy for the organization and the publics involved. Not only does this study test the utility of Ni and Kim's (2009) framework for understanding activist publics, but it also seeks to examine the changes in how publics apply problem solving strategies to resolve an issue over time. Furthermore, because it is hard to reach a consensus on chronic issues, it is important to gain some insights from communication experts in regard to conflict resolution.

Several steps were taken to address the goals of the present study. First, it uses a case-based approach to better delineate the publics' problem-solving behaviors and their changes over time. A chronic environmental issue that affected a large population in South Korea was thus selected to allow an identification of all possible types of publics and their transitions over time. Second, although this study specifically examines activist publics who work on a chronic issue for several years, it is still important to examine other types of publics involved in the issue. Understanding other types of publics helps to explain why we need to pay more attention to the unique characteristics of activist publics in the given issue, hence in-depth interviews were conducted. Finally, interviews with communication experts were also conducted to gain insights about the viable problem solving strategies for the parties involved.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Problem-Solving Strategies for Win-Win Outcomes: The Mutual Gains Approach**

Pressure from or conflicts with activists are often considered a serious problem for organizations because activists affect an organization's ability to accomplish its goals (Anderson, 1992; Grunig, 1992; Murphy & Dee, 1992; Werder, 2009). Although Grunig's

(1992) study was conducted in the 1990s, her research findings still hold true: there are still many organizations that are at odds with activists. Organizations involved in a conflict usually take a defensive approach or choose to not address a conflict (i.e., avoiding, Plowman *et al.*, 1995). Moreover, because the multiple parties involved in conflicts usually pursue strategies that only promote their self-interest, it is hard to find a solution (Plowman, 2008). When a conflict lasts for a long time and becomes chronic both the organization and activist publics suffer from a stalemate in finding a resolution.

Hence conflict resolution is an important agenda for public relations, issue management, corporate communication, and strategic management (Grunig, 1992; Heath, 1997; Henderson, 2005; Smith & Ferguson, 2001; Talyor *et al.*, 2001). Plowman and his colleagues (Plowman *et al.*, 1995; Plowman *et al.*, 2001; Plowman, 2008) have investigated a variety of conflict-resolution strategies. Recent studies on activism have attempted to better understand activists and addressed several important issues, such as activists' use of technology for building alliances and setting the public agenda (Taylor *et al.*, 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006), and internal activism (McCown, 2007). However, relatively little research has been conducted on conflict-resolution strategies that help both organizations and publics achieve win-win outcomes, especially in chronic issues.

In terms of reaching consensus and agreement between an organization and its publics in problematic situations, the concept of the two-way symmetrical approach has been extensively discussed and used among public relations scholars and practitioners since Grunig and Hunt (1984) introduced the term to describe the practices of public relations managers in their model of public relations. This approach emphasizes mutual



understanding, dialogue, reciprocity, and the balancing of the interests between an organization and its publics that allows the organization to build and maintain favorable relationships with its publics (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). It has been considered an ethical basis of public relations (Bowen, 2004). Although the approach does not guarantee equal benefits for all parties involved in an issue, it plays a key role in bridging or narrowing gaps between management and publics (Grunig *et al.*, 2002).

Some scholars view the symmetrical communication approach as unattainable, and believe that it does not account for power imbalances (e.g., Coombs, 1993; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Other scholars perceive symmetrical communication as corporatecentric, rare, and idealistic (e.g., Cancel *et al.*, 1999; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Kersten, 1994; Leichthy & Springton, 1993; Miller, 1989; Murphy & Dee, 1996; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Van der Meidan, 1993; Vasquez, 1996). For instance, Stokes and Rubin (2010) posit a new rhetorical theory to “account for groups that refuse to accommodate opponents” (p. 26) using the Phillip Morris litigation case.

While the above studies attempted to narrow gaps between theory and practice in public relations, they do not go beyond the description of reality and there is still some misunderstandings about two-way symmetrical communication. For example, Leichthy and Springton (1993) point out that many organizations use a combination of strategies; however, it is not necessarily the most desirable strategy to resolve organization-public conflicts. In fact, symmetrical communication can be used even in unbalanced power relationships between organizations and publics (e.g. Hung, 2003). Although Plowman’s

(2008) study found that people usually prefer a combination of symmetrical and nonsymmetrical strategies, he also proposed a new symmetrical model of *mediation* that helps multiple parties understand one another's interests and minimize conflicts among them.

We believe it is worthwhile to reexamine the value of symmetrical communication as a problem-solving strategy for the parties involved in a conflict, especially for chronic issues. Public relations scholars suggest that an effective conflict resolution strategy should address the needs of the various parties involved by adjusting their goals because a conflict occurs between parties with different interests (Plowman *et al.*, 1995; Grunig, 1991; Grunig *et al.*, 2002), and by adopting the two-way symmetrical communication approach (Grunig, 1992) or the mixed-motive approach (Murphy, 1991). Verčič and Grunig (1995) suggest that collaboration with activists could provide organizations with a competitive advantage. Moreover, scholars in political science have also supported the idea of reciprocity and openmindedness (Arendt, 1961; Benhabib, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, as cited in Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007). Yet Deegan (2001) warns that “moving towards a win-win situation takes time and can only happen in a background of ongoing relationship building, negotiation and conflict resolution using two-way symmetrical communications” (p. 38).

This study proposes Susskind and Field's (1996) mutual gains approach as a viable problem-solving strategy for a chronic-issue situation in which conflicts are not easily resolved over time. It is important to suggest a problem-solving strategy that addresses the interests of both the organization and activists involved in a conflict. Grunig *et al.* (2002) describe Susskind and Field's (1996) mutual gains approach as showing “how to practice

the two-way symmetrical model in conflict situations” (Grunig *et al.*, 2002, pp. 158-159). To break the deadlock of a conflict, it is important to propose conflict-resolution strategies as a practical approach to resolving chronic issues. Chronic issues are problematic because organizations and activist publics continue to prolong the life of the issue over time due to their different problem-solving approaches without seeking win-win outcomes. As a result, both parties fail to effectively utilize their resources for conflict resolution.

Susskind and Field’s (1996) mutual gains approach consists of six strategies that can be implemented when all parties involved in a conflict attempt to understand one another’s concerns and positions: “(1) acknowledge the concerns of the other side (2) encourage joint fact-finding (3) offer contingent commitments to minimize impacts if they do occur; promise to compensate knowable but unintended impacts (4) accept responsibility, admit mistakes, and share power (5) act in a trustworthy fashion at all times and (6) focus on building long-term relationships” (pp. 37-38). Three levels of change result from the mutual gains approach (Susskind & Field, 1996). On the first level the disputants agree to make peripheral changes, yet the ongoing hostilities remain unchanged. On the second level certain aspects of the relationship between the two parties are changed but the fundamental values remain unchanged. On the third level fundamental changes are made in terms of the way the two parties perceive themselves.

To bring the intended changes from the mutual gains approach for conflict resolution, we suggest that identifying and understanding different segments of publics and their behaviors should accompany the use of the mutual gains approach. This approach, which is known as a strategy to deal with angry publics, seeks gradual changes in terms of

narrowing the gaps among all the parties involved in a conflict and takes into account the concerns and interests of each party. It is also viewed as an effective strategy for multiparty or multi-issue negotiation. Niemeyer and Dryzek (2007) also point out that reaching an agreement about the nature of a conflicting situation at hand (i.e., metaconsensus) is important rather than arguing about who is right in the situation or agreeing with each other's beliefs or values.

In the process of understanding the nature of the conflict as suggested above, it should be noted that different types of publics exist in the situation and that they exhibit different communication behaviors that bring different degrees of impact to the issue and the parties involved (e.g., Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Ni & Kim, 2009). Publics behave differently depending on their evaluation of the problematic situation or their situational perceptions including problem recognition, involvement recognition, constraint recognition (Kim & Grunig, 2011), and knowledge (Hallahan, 2001), or referent criterion (Grunig, 1997; Kim & Grunig, 2011). Thus before we propose problem-solving strategies for conflict resolution we must first understand the various types of publics and their communicative actions.

However, the dynamics of the different types of publics and their actions are conceptualized in a variety of ways in research and practice. Different scholars share different insights about the concept of publics (e.g., see the discussion over general publics vs. strategic publics in Kruckenberg & Vujnovic, 2010). This study finds Ni and Kim's (2009) typology of publics useful in understanding activist publics' communication behaviors because it is one of the few studies that extensively and comprehensively

explores the various types of publics and their communicative actions. As an issue develops over time, it is necessary to explore the different types of publics and the dynamics of their communicative actions for problem solving, trace their changes over time, and compare their approaches to resolving the issue. The following subsection discusses the different approaches to the concept of publics, the typology of publics, and their communicative behaviors.

### **Publics as Problem Solvers in Conflicts**

Since Dewey's (1927) work, the concept of publics has been developed by several public relations scholars including Grunig (1997), Hallahan (2001), Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2010), and Self (2010). In particular, Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics has received extensive attention in public relations research and practice for its utility of segmenting the masses into meaningful groups of publics and explaining their communicative behaviors (Table 1). However, several scholars have requested a reconceptualization of publics or a redefinition of the range of strategic publics. For example, Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2010) were opposed to Grunig and his colleagues' notion of a strategic public (e.g., Dozier *et al.*, 1995; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Hallahan (2001) has also criticized J. E. Grunig and his colleagues' focus on strategic publics for overlooking the importance of inactive publics.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

As an attempt to better develop the concept of publics and to delineate the dynamics of their communicative behaviors in problematic situations, Kim and his colleagues (Ni & Kim, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2010; Kim & Grunig, 2011) proposed the Communicative Action of

Publics in Problem Solving (hereafter CAPS). They introduced six types of communication behaviors—information forwarding, information sharing, information seeking, information attending, information forefending, and information permitting—that can be predicted by the degree of problem recognition, involvement recognition, constraint recognition, referent criterion, and situational motivation (Table 2. Using the framework of CAPS, Ni and Kim (2009) (Figure 2) conceptualized an evolution of publics and proposed eight types of publics in their study (Figure 1). Based on three key problem-solving characteristics—openness to approaches in problem solving, time or history of the problem solving, and the extent of activeness in problem solving)—publics could be grouped into the categories of “closed-situational activist public, open-situational activist public, closed-chronic activist public, open-chronic activist public, closed-situational active public, open-situational active public, closed-dormant passive public and open-dormant passive public” (pp. 231-235) (Figure 1) (Table 3).

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

[Insert Figure 2 around here]

[Insert Table 2 around here]

[Insert Table 3 around here]

Inspired by Ni and Kim’s (2009) typology of publics, this study aims to provide a better understanding of activist publics’ problem-solving behaviors in a chronic issue and to propose a conflict-resolution strategy for the given issue. Since the nature of activism is different in different countries (Verčič *et al.*, 1996; Grunig., 1997; Kim & Sriramesh, 2003), this study aims to gain deeper insight into the characteristics of chronic activism in Korea

and to examine the generalizability of Ni and Kim's (2009) framework in a different culture. Korea has continuously experienced high degrees of activism (e.g., candlelight rallies over the American beef controversy in 2008, a recent street demonstration over the ferry tragedy issue). Its government's capacity has been considered weak in addressing social conflicts. Understanding this specific type of activism and the viable conflict-resolution strategies for both publics and organizations involved promotes a democratic approach to conflict resolution.

While many issues fight for the attention of citizens and the government, the number of people interested in an issue usually decreases over time as it becomes chronic unless there is continuous confrontation between the activists and the organization involved. A chronic issue could have once been a hot issue that involved "nearly everyone in the population and that has received extensive media coverage" (Grunig, 1997, p.13). In other words, a hot issue becomes chronic when it lasts a long time without reaching an agreement on issue resolution, media coverage dwindles, and people no longer pay attention to the issue (Ni & Kim, 2009).

The different nature of issues can yield different types of publics and activism so it is important to further investigate chronic activism that receives relatively little attention in research and in society at large compared to a hot situational issue. Our first research question thus examines whether the types of publics involved in a chronic issue are different from those in a hot situational issue and whether Ni and Kim's (2009) proposed framework is applicable in a different context.

RQ1: What types of publics exist and are salient in a chronic environmental issue?

How similar or different are they from Ni and Kim's (2009) typology?

In exploring the nature and characteristics of the publics involved in the issue, it is necessary to investigate their motivation and their problem-solving behaviors for resolving the issue. Ni and Kim (2009) adopted three key concepts from situational theory: problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition. This study uses the same approach to explain the different types of publics and their communicative behaviors for problem solving. The following questions address how their theoretical framework explains the communicative behaviors of activist publics in a chronic issue.

RQ 2: To what extent and why are activist publics still engaged in the chronic issue?

RQ2-1: How do activist publics differ from other types of publics in terms of their problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition?

After investigating the motivation of activist publics in the chronic issue, it is necessary to see whether their problem-solving behaviors are similarly shown in the given case as Ni and Kim's (2009) study suggests, and to compare activist publics and other types of publics to better understand chronic activism. For example, Ni and Kim (2009) suggest that chronic activists no longer engage in information seeking. Hence the following research questions are proposed:

RQ 3: What are activist publics' communicative behaviors? How do their communicative behaviors differ from those of other types of publics? How similar or different are they from Ni and Kim's (2009) framework? If different, why?



In probing into the different problem-solving approaches adopted by activist publics and other types of publics, it is necessary to test the utility of Ni and Kim's (2009) key problem-solving characteristics (openness and extent of activeness in problem solving) to explain the communicative actions and opinions of publics regarding conflict resolution (Figure 1). We therefore raise the following research questions:

RQ 4: To what extent are activist publics open to approaches in problem solving and what solution is viable from their point of view?

RQ 5: What are the viable conflict resolution strategies for this chronic issue?

## **Method**

### **Overview**

A case study was used to distinguish the different types of publics for a chronic issue based on Ni and Kim's (2009) three key problem-solving characteristics. A total of twenty-four people were interviewed. Additionally, five communication experts were interviewed to recommend viable conflict-resolution strategies.

### **Case Selection**

The authors selected an environmental issue because it involves several groups of stakeholders who are affected by potential or actual damages. In addition, environmental issues are usually complicated and often last for a long time (i.e., chronic issue). This nature of environmental issues allows researchers to probe into several types of publics and the possible options for conflict resolution. The Taean oil spill case was one of the most significant issues to affect the entire Korean community, environment, and economy (Eum *et al.*, 2008; Hebei Sprit, para.4, para.5). Not only has it caused disputes among different groups, it has continued for several years without reaching a resolution.

**Sampling**

To identify publics who have been affected by the Taean oil spill issue, twenty-four interviews were conducted from September to December 2011 (for participant information, see Table 4). We began with a search of current and former activists as well as other types of publics in the issue.

[Insert Table 4 around Here]

First, cold calls and snowball sampling were used to find current and former activists. Names, affiliations, and contacts of activists were found on Web sites and in news articles. A total of five professional activists were initially contacted via cold calls. The purpose of this study was explained to them by email and by phone. One of the activists could not be reached. One declined the invitation, but referred us to another activist. One of them referred us to two citizen activists. Another activist also referred us to one former activist. The former activist then referred us to four other former activists who had worked with him on this issue. A questionnaire was sent to the five current activists. The four former activists agreed to participate by email prior to the interview. Second, in addition to these nine current and former activists, a convenience sample was taken from the researchers' social networks to identify other possible types of publics. Since almost everyone had heard of the Taean oil spill, the incident was a hot issue in Korea. Thus an additional fifteen people participated in the interviews.

Both convenience and snowball sampling were used for recommendations of conflict resolution strategies. After one consultant was contacted via the researchers' social networks he recommended three other experts, two of whom accepted the invitation. They

then recommended two additional experts. The purpose of the research and the interview questions were emailed to them in advance. One expert was interviewed on Skype, and the other four were interviewed by email. Because all these experts are considered top issue management consultants in Korea, it is possible that these experts could be reached for future studies. The authors chose to contact communication consultants instead of communication managers at Samsung Heavy Industries; the communication managers did not respond to the invitation to be interviewed.

### **Interview Protocol Design**

The interview protocol was constructed based on the three independent variables (problem recognition, involvement recognition, constraint recognition) and the six dependent variables of Kim *et al.*'s (2010) CAPS (Communicative Actions for Problem Solving) (information seeking, information attending, information forefending, information permitting, information forwarding, and information sharing), and Ni and Kim's (2009) three criteria of public segmentation (openness to approaches in problem solving, extent of activeness, history of problem solving). A total of twenty-eight questions were created for the publics and two questions for the communication experts.

### **Data Analysis**

To interpret the findings of the interviews with the different types of publics, a coding scheme was developed based on Kim *et al.*'s (2010) CAPS (Communicative Actions for Problem Solving) and Ni and Kim's (2009) framework for the evolution of publics (Figure 1). Emerging codes were also included in the data analysis, such as the source of responsibility and the perceived impact on reputation. When interpreting the

results our interpretations were compared with Ni and Kim's (2009) definitions of the eight types of publics. For example, we examined whether the patterns identified in the different types of publics were coded in accordance with the illustrative quotes (Table 5) presented in Ni and Kim's (2009) study. We also coded the characteristics of communicative behaviors and situational perceptions based on Kim *et al.*'s (2010) descriptions (summarized in Table 2). Results from the semistructured interviews also showed some new characteristics in the different types of publics that were not presented in Ni and Kim's study (2009). To protect respondents' identities this paper uses a combination of abbreviations of public types and random numbering (Table 4).

[Insert Table 5 around here]

### **Case Description**

#### **An Oil Spill Incident in Korea, 2007**

A description of the incident presented on the Web site of International Oil Pollution Compensation Funds (hereafter IOPC) is shown below.

The Hong Kong flag tanker Hebei Spirit (146 848 GT) was struck by the crane barge Samsung N°1 while at anchor about five nautical miles off Taean on the west coast of the Republic of Korea. The crane barge was being towed by two tugs (Samsung N°5 and Samho T3) when the towline broke. Weather conditions were poor and it was reported that the crane barge drifted into the tanker, puncturing three of its port cargo tanks (Hebei spirit, para. 1). ... As a result of the collision a total of 10,900 tonnes of oil (a mix of Iranian Heavy, Upper Zakum and Kuwait Export) escaped into the sea. Shortly after the incident the Korean Government declared it a national disaster. The Hebei Spirit is owned by Hebei Spirit Shipping

Company Limited. The crane barge and the two tugs are owned and/or operated by Samsung Corporation and its subsidiary Samsung Heavy Industries (SHI), which belong to the Samsung Group, the Republic of Korea's largest industrial conglomerate (Hebei spirit, para.4).

This incident is considered the largest oil spill to ever occur in Korea (Eum *et al.*, 2008). The previous largest oil spill took place in 1995 when 5,000 tons of oil spilled in the southern coast of the country (BBC, 2007). It destroyed the ecosystem, fisheries, and tourism in the affected areas (Hebei Sprit, para.4, para.5). Residents in the affected areas suffered from a variety of diseases and were exposed to health risks (Choi, 2010; Yoo, 2010). Considering the amount of damage to the environment and local communities, a long-term comprehensive investigation into the extent of the damage was deemed necessary (Yoo, 2010).

### **Results**

RQ1: What types of publics exist and are salient in a chronic environmental issue?  
How similar or different are they from Ni and Kim's (2009) typology?

A total of five types of publics were identified for the issue: closed-chronic activist public, open-chronic activist public, closed-dormant passive public, open-dormant passive public and nonpublic (Figure 3). Contrary to Ni and Kim's (2009) findings, the majority of our participants were closed-dormant passive publics (CDPP). Ni and Kim (2009) found that the pattern of closed-dormant passive publics was unclear except for high constraint recognition, and that the majority of their participants were open-dormant passive publics. In addition, they could not find the existence of an open-chronic activist public. This study

found that majority of activist publics are closed-chronic activist publics and that none of the participants were situational activists or situational active publics because the incident took place several years ago. However chronic activists in the given issue exhibited some characteristics of situational activists to some extent in an effort not to make the issue forgotten in Korean society. To explain, they acknowledged that the issue will not be resolved soon and that they feel frustrated and constrained by the deadlock of the situation. Although there have been no changes in the behaviors of Samsung Heavy Industries or the Korean government over several years, they feel they cannot stop their problem solving behaviors. Details of their behaviors will follow in a later section.

[Insert Figure 3 around Here]

### **Problem Recognition, Involvement Recognition, and Constraint Recognition as Factors Determining Chronic Activism**

RQ 2: To what extent and why are activist publics still engaged in the chronic issue?

RQ2-1: How do activist publics differ from other types of publics in terms of their problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition?

**Chronic activists.** Regardless of their openness to problem solving, both closed (CCA) and open-chronic activists (OCA) still perceive the issue as problematic and requiring a long-term resolution. CCA#2 said, “It may take at least more than ten years or even fifty years to restore the damaged environment.” CCA#3 and CCA#4 answered that “the issue has not been resolved yet, so we should continue to work on this issue.” They thought about the issue almost every day. OCA#1 pointed out the problem of the lack of

preliminary data: “To estimate the time that the environmental restoration will take, we need to have preliminary data on the environment, such as lugworm dispersion or the distribution of plants throughout the region, to compare the conditions before and after accident. But there is no such data available in Korea. It is nonsense to conclude that the disappearance of the oil band indicates environment restoration.”

Both closed- and open-chronic activists showed high levels of involvement recognition due to either their jobs or personal reasons. Although they now spend less time on this issue compared to when the accident occurred, they feel that they are still affected by the issue. Three of the respondents perceived this issue to be important partially because of their jobs as environmental activists and for personal reasons. CCA#4 reported that her life was affected because she worked in a fish market. CCA#3 was indirectly influenced since her family-in laws lived in Taean. CCA#1 emphasized the importance of community development. CCA#2 felt that this issue was important to her because she started her career as an activist on this issue. CCA#2 and CCA#3 stated that they were spending thirty percent of their time on this issue and would continue to work on it until it was resolved.

Open-chronic activists differed from closed-chronic activists because of their level of constraint recognition. Open-chronic activists continued to work and remained hopeful about reaching a resolution (low constraint recognition). However, closed-chronic activists felt powerless (high constraint recognition) because they felt that Samsung’s reputation was not affected by the accident and that the government was not helpful in supporting affected residents and stakeholders. However they did not give up. OCA#1 said, “Investigation and monitoring by citizens can bring changes to some extent.” However, CCA#1 and CCA#3

pointed out that Koreans were beginning to forget about the issue, which was why the government decreased its budget for the issue. CCA#1 said, "There is not much that I can do about this issue." CCA#2 listed three obstacles to addressing this issue. First, the biggest challenge was that Samsung Heavy Industries would not change. The second was the government's attitude: "Even if Samsung Heavy Industries had neglected their responsibilities, the government could have done something to force Samsung Heavy Industries to fulfill their responsibilities to correct the situation." The third obstacle was citizens' perception about their roles in resolving this issue. She argued that citizens talked about this issue but did not take any action because they believed taking action was the responsibility of activists.

Interestingly, despite their high constraint recognition, closed-chronic activists were still motivated to work on the issue. They felt that their work had to continue despite the many obstacles that they could not overcome because there was no one else who would do it, and that the government would neglect its duty. These activists' problem recognition and involvement recognition played a significant role in keeping their motivation alive. In addition, part of their motivation came from their anti-Samsung sentiments. For example, CCA#2 was more motivated because she was infuriated with Samsung's irresponsible behavior and had begun her career with this issue. Because there were few organizations working on this issue, she and her organization felt that they had to work harder. In addition, she said, "My activity plan, especially against Samsung, is part of my voluntary willingness and motivation." CCA#3 emphasized the seriousness of health issues in the affected area. CCA#1 was motivated because he was a resident of the accident site.



**Closed-dormant passive publics (CDPP).** Interestingly, even though most of the closed-dormant passive publics used to be active volunteers on the issue or former Samsung employees, their problem recognition varied. This result shows that publics are situational and that a hot issue is easily forgotten when the media stops covering the issue. While CDPPs #1, 4, and 6 stated that the issue was not as serious as before, CDPPs #5, 7, 8, and 10 pointed out several problems that were yet to be addressed, including food safety, environmental contamination, health risks, and compensation. CDPPs #2 and 3 said that the issue had almost dissipated even though the compensation issue had not been resolved.

This study discovered much clearer patterns of involvement recognition than Ni and Kim's (2009) study, which discovered mixed levels of involvement recognition. Neither closed- nor open-dormant passive publics displayed involvement recognition about this issue any more despite their high involvement in the past. This low level of involvement recognition was somewhat surprising to the researchers considering the background of participants. CDPP#5 was the volunteers' group leader for legal counsel services for one year, and created an online community to help volunteers exchange information. CDPP#7 was one of the most active activists on the issue but no longer had involvement recognition. He and his colleagues provided free legal counsel services to the victims. They had also published a judicial report for court submission and had contributed several columns to newspapers to influence opinion on the passing of a special law regarding this issue.

Closed-dormant passive publics felt that the issue is now beyond their control (high constraint recognition). CDPP#9 said that nothing could be done because this issue was "legally" over. CDPP#2 thought that other issues were competing for attention. She said, "I

feel that it is difficult to make people pay attention again. We have already done many activities to advocate the cause. Once an issue approaches the trial stage, there are not many things left for us to do any more. In addition, our organization has a lot of trial cases to address, so we cannot focus on this issue anymore.” She also believed that judicial review and judgments in Korea were too conservative and passive.

**Open-dormant passive publics (ODPP).** These publics no longer perceived this issue as a problem even though they were involved in the issue in the past. When the accident occurred, ODPP#1 and her friends sent used clothes and other necessary goods to the residents in Taean. She also participated in the oil cleanup activities. However, four years after this accident she was not sure whether this issue was still problematic. ODPP#4, a professional activist, had worked on the issue for three months, but was assigned to another project afterward and had not thought about the issue since. ODPP#3, a former Samsung employee, thought the issue had been resolved to some extent and that the environmental damage in the affected areas had been corrected. ODPP#4 is a professional activist for environmental issues and had actively worked on the issue for three months. However, he was assigned to work on another project and his involvement recognition gradually decreased. He is currently passive on this issue but is willing to pay attention to this issue again if he feels there is still more to be done. He is open to different options for problem solving because he feels that many people have been suffering for several years because of the stalemate in the conflict resolution efforts.

Like closed-dormant passive publics, open-dormant passive publics also have high constraint recognition. ODPP#2 thought she might not be able to affect the way the issue

would be resolved. The biggest obstacle was that the issue was being forgotten. ODPP#1 and ODPP#3 said that people showed indifference and apathy, and perceived that no more work could be done on this issue. ODDP#4 pointed out the lack of accountability in dealing with this kind of issue in Korea. He argued that the organization that caused the accident should take responsibility for the consequences, but there was no such principle in Korea. He also talked about the lack of government regulations over the company and the lack of the company's open communication with the victims.

### **Problem-Solving Strategies: Information Acquisition, Selection, and Transmission**

RQ 3: What are activist publics' information behaviors? How do their communicative behaviors differ from those of other types of publics? How similar or different are they from Ni and Kim's (2009) framework? If different, why?

**Chronic activists.** Both closed- and open-chronic activists are still engaged in information processing and information seeking. This finding is slightly different from those of Ni and Kim (2009). According to Ni and Kim (2009), chronic activists are not engaged in information-seeking behaviors because they already possess a substantial amount of information. However, the participants exhibited active information behaviors regarding the Korean oil spill issue. Even though they already possessed plenty of information, they continued to seek information using professional networks and by visiting the accident site regularly because they perceived the seriousness of health and compensation issues. CCA#3 maintained her relationships with lawyers, residents, and experts for new information, and used Google alerts for news because she was working on a white paper and an investigative report. CCA#1 obtained information from government

officials, researchers, and scholars. CCA#2 obtained information by continuously monitoring the government's plan, residents' opinions, and IOPC's activities. OCA#1 continued to collect information by participating in a civil investigation team run by an environmental movement organization.

Chronic activists screen information using their own criteria (information forefending). The only information that CCA#1 found useful was materials that government officials had collected from seminars abroad, workshops, and conferences. CCA#2's criterion for utility was whether the information was helpful to resolving the issue. CCA#3 said, "To produce certain information, it needs a specific problem recognition. If a certain article is based on similar problem recognition to mine, I choose the information." OCA#1 relied on the information produced by a specific environmental movement organization.

Chronic activists tend to be information sources for friends, colleagues, and even the media. CCA#3 shared information both when solicited and when she was not. CCA#2 actively shared information by meeting with citizens and through a variety of online media, such as her organization's homepage, Facebook, and Twitter. She engaged in conversations with citizens and residents in the accident site. She also set up a citizen investigation team and regularly met the members and residents in Taeon to share information. CCA#1 worked as an ambassador for environmental protection and restoration. Open-chronic activists were also active information forwarders. OCA#1 and his colleagues set up a Web site to prevent this issue from being forgotten.

**Dormant-passive publics.** Neither open and closed dormant passive publics were engaged in information seeking. Similar to the results of Ni and Kim (2009), they exhibited information-attending behavior. ODPP#1 no longer paid attention to the issue. ODPP#3 pointed out that the media no longer covered this issue. CDPP#10, a radio program producer, was mostly engaged in information attending. Although he still wanted to track the dynamics of discussion among stakeholders over the years, he paid attention only when this issue appeared in the news because the issue was no longer receiving much media coverage.

Consistent with Ni and Kim's (2009) findings, closed-dormant passive publics (CDPP) were also forefending information and information sources. CDPP#8 preferred the online community to television and newspapers. His criteria were truth, justice, and sincerity. CDPP# 9 held opinions similar to those of CDPP#8: "TV and newspapers speak for one side only." This type of public also mentioned liberal newspapers (CDPP#3), objective sources (CDPP#1), and colleagues (CDPP#5) as reliable sources. In contrast, open-dormant passive publics were engaged in information permitting. ODPP#1 said, "I read anything at random. Rather than having specific criteria to evaluate the quality of information, I tend to read both sides of opinions."

Both open- and closed-dormant passive publics showed similar patterns of passive information transmission behaviors. Since most of them were former activist publics (eight were former volunteers, three were former Samsung employees, and one used to track and cover this issue for his radio program), they had actively shared information with others.

CDPP#3 said, “I used to forward information very actively. However, in the past one to two years this issue has never been a topic of conversation in my life.”

**Nonpublics.** Because the issue was well known in Korea even nonpublics were aware of what had happened, but nonpublics did not and do not have any problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition about the issue. They no longer displayed any information behaviors.

### **Acceptable and Unacceptable Approaches**

RQ 4: To what extent are activist publics open to approaches in problem solving and what solution is viable from their point of view?

**Chronic activists.** For closed chronic activists, “there might be multiple solutions to the issue, but there should be a fundamental principle” (Ni & Kim, 2009, p.230). CCA#1 stated that even though he listened to opposing opinions, his fundamental principle was that love for the community was the most important. CCA#2 and CCA#3 also listened to opposing views but adhered to their belief that Samsung should change. In terms of the source of responsibility, open-chronic activists tended to point out that problems existed among all the parties involved while closed-chronic activists still argued that Samsung should be held responsible. However, when it came to a resolution, rather than providing a specific solution or a direction toward conflict resolution they suggested that all parties involved should meet and agree on a resolution. These open-chronic activists tended to welcome any viable conflict resolution that would work for a variety of stakeholders rather than favoring a specific way of problem solving (Figure 3).

**Dormant passive publics.** Even though closed dormant passive publics were no longer active on this issue, they had a clear idea about who should be held responsible and what problem-solving approach should be adopted. Most CDPPs talked about Samsung's accountability for a solution. CDPP#8 believed that the most desirable solution would be for Samsung to apologize and compensate the victims for the damages incurred. CDPP#5, CDPP #9, and CDPP#10 suggested that the government also involve itself proactively in resolving the issue.

In contrast, compared to closed publics, open dormant passive publics (ODPP) were more open to both the approaches to problem solving and the source of responsibility (Figure 3). While blaming both the government and Samsung, open-dormant passive publics (ODPP) suggested that open discussion among the government, the companies involved, and the communities affected be held. ODPP#2 was not sure about the most desirable solution but believed that people should be concerned about the ecosystem. ODPP#3 and ODPP #4 suggested that all stakeholders discuss the issue until they reach a consensus on the most satisfactory solution. ODPP#1 was not sure about what the government, the media, and Samsung should do, but thought that continuous effort to resolve this issue was important. While CDPPs had a clear idea about how to solve this issue, ODPPs were open to discussion to find feasible solutions for community residents, the government, and the company involved in the accident.

### **Is the Mutual Gains Approach Possible?**

RQ 5: What are the viable conflict resolution strategies for this chronic issue?

The interviews with publics showed that open-chronic activists and open-dormant passive publics believe that open discussion for consensus among all parties involved is necessary and viable. However, closed-chronic activists and closed-dormant passive publics still maintain firm positions about how the conflict should be resolved (i.e., Samsung's fully accountable actions). As its problem solving strategy, Samsung Heavy Industries sought legal action to protect its company. Communication experts were interviewed to explore the possible options of conflict resolution at this stage (R5).

To resolve this chronic environmental conflict that still affects the environment and the livelihood of many residents and has not reached any substantial conflict resolution, the communication experts (CE) suggested some conflict-resolution strategies for Samsung Heavy Industries and the stakeholders involved. The interview results show that it is not too late for both sides to collaborate on conflict resolution in the long term, especially for environmental restoration and the company's benefit. The experts stated that collaboration would allow Samsung to build a favorable relationship with affected stakeholders and restore its reputation in the long term. This means a reciprocal acknowledgement of concerns and efforts to reduce gaps to improve their relationships.

CE#1 emphasized collaboration with NGOs and the government's role in finding a solution for the issue. "When an NGO attacks a corporation, there can be two types of responses from the corporation: avoidance and cooperation. It would be a great crisis management strategy for the corporation to proactively suggest collaboration with NGOs and discuss how to improve relationships with them, what kind of systems should be established for future environmental issues, and how the corporation and the residents can



achieve more gains while avoiding huge damages.” He also argued that “activists can change their stance from an aggressive to a cooperative attitude if the corporation were to show its willingness to negotiate proactively. It is possible for activists and an organization to gradually find a happy medium. When the organization takes a defensive approach, activists tend to be more aggressive toward the corporation. Hence even though activists seem extreme in their stance, their attitude actually depends on the organization’s attitude. Both the activists and the organization should adopt an approach that will result in a win-win situation for all concerned in this issue.” He added that the government should take a more proactive role in imposing chargeability on the company.

CE#3 suggested that NGOs and the residents give Samsung the opportunity to fulfill its social responsibility. He emphasized that the constant blaming of Samsung would not help residents’ cause in the long run. He warned that it would be risky to discuss idealistic approaches, and that discussion among stakeholders would be necessary before requesting action from Samsung Heavy Industries. He argued that NGOs and the residents have to acknowledge that Samsung Heavy Industries cannot cover the cost of damages at the expense of its survival. Rather, both sides have to find a common ground to restore the ecosystem and the environment with the help of the government.

CE#2 discussed problem-solving strategies from the perspective of activist publics. He suggested that not only should Samsung Heavy Industries make provisions for environmental issues in advance, but should also approach the affected residents in good faith to address their grievances. He also proposed that NGOs consider new media

strategies to pressure both Samsung Heavy Industries and the government to prepare a specific plan for future environmental accidents.

While CE#4 exhibited similar opinions to these three CEs, calling for Samsung's accountability and the government's follow-up actions for conflict resolution, CE #5 argued that there are many possible options and it is difficult to pinpoint a win-win strategy for the given issue when stakeholders with different goals are involved. In CE #5's opinion, Samsung and Hebei Spirit made the most rational choice (i.e., legal action and a low-profile approach) considering their limited resources for resolving the environmental conflict. He further argued that the symmetrical approach may not fully satisfy all the parties involved, but partial settlement with the intervention of government may be feasible.

### **Discussion**

This study aims to provide an understanding of the communicative behaviors of activist publics who have worked on an oil spill issue in Korea for more than four years, and to suggest some viable conflict resolution strategies. As Kim *et al.* (2010) suggest, segmentation of publics is necessary for organizations to adopt strategies "to maximize strategic opportunities and to minimize strategic threats" in an effort to prevent an issue from escalating into a crisis (p. 761). This approach not only benefits an organization, but also the quality relationships between an organization and publics. To attain these goals it is important for organizations to view and use public relations as bridging the gaps between their management and publics, which is understood as strategic management of public relations (Grunig, 2009). When an issue continues to develop, different types of publics change in terms of their communicative behaviors for problem solving (Kim & Grunig,

2011). For this reason, it is important to understand how publics and issues evolve over time, especially the changes in the approaches publics adopt to resolve the issue.

The findings about closed-chronic activist publics in this study are consistent with Ni and Kim's (2009) typology except those concerning chronic activists' high constraint recognition and information-seeking behaviors. The researchers also discovered that chronic activists show significantly different characteristics from other types of publics. Even though it has been several years since the accident took place, these activists are still involved in the issue while other types of publics are not. The findings suggest that the majority of current activists in this issue are closed-chronic activists. In terms of their information behaviors, this study shows slightly different results from Ni and Kim's (2009) findings in which they proposed that closed-chronic activists are mainly engaged in information attending. Most chronic activists identified in this study are still engaged in active information seeking and information forefending regardless of their openness to problem-solving approaches.

The researchers noted that frustration (closed chronic activists) or hope (open chronic activists) for change motivated chronic activists to continue to work on this issue. Closed chronic activists felt that they could not beat Samsung and might not be able to change the company. Especially closed chronic activists had very high constraint recognition that could have prevented them from doing active problem solving behaviors. However their disappointment with the company and the Korean government over several years motivated them to continue to work on the issue. The researchers believe that their high constraint recognition about the issue produced another problem recognition about the

company and the government that triggered their problem solving actions. However, many former professional activists were no longer activist publics in this chronic issue. Open-chronic activist publics, which were not found in Ni and Kim's (2009) study, were identified in this chronic environmental issue that affected the entire nation of Korea. In contrast to closed chronic activists, open-chronic activists became more desensitized to the source of accountability and are more open to viable options for conflict resolution after several year passed since the incident.

In addition, there were more closed-dormant passive publics rather than open-dormant passive publics in the given issue. The findings of Ni and Kim's (2009) were opposite. Ni and Kim's (2009) identification of the overall characteristics of public types and theoretical framework was useful in terms of explaining what activist publics do and why, and how they evolve into other types of publics over time. However, the researchers found that the question of which types of publics were more salient depends on the nature of the issue and the cultural context. Even though these passive publics no longer consider this issue to be serious, they still have preferences about how this conflict should be resolved. This may be because the selected issue in this study was formerly a hot issue that affected almost everyone in Korea. Since many people worked as volunteers cleaning up the spill on the coast, they were active publics for several months. This environmental conflict yielded endless discussion over the source of responsibility, compensation, and resolution. It also led to the rise of furious activist publics, mainly residents in the affected area still wanting to fight Samsung Heavy Industries. Hence former and current activists in this issue are more likely to adopt a closed rather than an open approach to problem solving.

If corporations know that a hot issue is gradually forgotten as a result of which the number of activists decreases over time, many of them may choose to not collaborate with activist publics and may prefer to wait until these activists are exhausted and disappear. Despite this, they should not underestimate the long-term impact that a few activist publics in a chronic issue could make on their reputation, credibility, competitiveness, or effectiveness. In this study publics and communication experts presented different opinions about Samsung's reputation. Communication experts believed that Samsung's reputation and credibility were damaged because of its reaction to the issue. Although the number of activist publics may decrease over time, there are still others who continue to be engaged in problem solving behaviors until the issue is resolved. Even though former activists became passive publics as a result of their involvement in other environmental issues and dissipating media coverage, the researchers believe that the characteristics of chronic activists' information behaviors still deserve attention.

Future research should investigate the anticorporatism or anti-Samsung sentiment in Korea because it was found to be one of the factors motivating chronic activists to work on the issue. According to Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics and Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving, publics arise when they are affected by problems caused by the behaviors or decisions of corporations. However, their actions are sometimes driven by anticorporate sentiment, an ideology that causes challenge or turbulence for corporations when people become suspicious about large corporations (Future Foundation, 2013). In addition, as some of participants pointed out in the interviews, there are certain elements of the Korean culture that more easily cause public

anger, such as a culture where no one, especially a big conglomerate or a government, takes responsibility for wrongdoing. This may be one of the reasons why it is difficult to reach consensus in Korea.

In terms of conflict resolution, this study proposes the two-way symmetrical approach as an overarching principle and the mutual-gains approach as a set of subprinciples that can be translated into action on a chronic environmental issue. Despite criticism, the researchers believe that the symmetrical approach remains the most effective way of dealing with activists (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 1997). Interviews with communication experts also confirmed that collaboration is the way forward to reach a win-win solution with intervention from the government on the given issue. Collaboration or symmetrical communication, based on the mutual gains approach, does not mean that either side should give in or agree to the values or beliefs of the other side. This suggested approach requires acknowledgement of the fact that reaching consensus is actually very challenging. The first step of collaboration should begin with the narrowing of gaps on peripheral issues, third-party mediation, or a discussion on the nature of the issue or directions for a win-win outcome. Because only a small number of interviews on conflict resolution strategies were conducted in this study, more research should be conducted to further explore viable options for conflict resolution.

For the issue to be satisfactorily resolved, Samsung Heavy Industries may need to invite neutral mediators to help the company and residents reach a resolution. They should share their decision-making power with key publics and build long-term relationships with the residents and NGOs. If Samsung takes the initiative in collaborating with NGOs, NGOs

are more likely to cooperate when the company encounters similar issues in the future. Considering the high motivation of chronic activists, Samsung should carefully plan a series of actions to begin conversations with various stakeholders about collaboration, joint fact-finding, and minimizing the damages caused.

However, as L.Grunig (1992) warns, symmetrical communication is not a panacea for all organizations or all types of issues. Although the two-way symmetrical approach is a proactive strategy for relationship building and negotiation, it does not resolve conflicts immediately. When both sides are committed to making a genuine effort to improving the situation, the chance of achieving a win-win situation will increase (Dozier *et al.*, 1995; Deegan, 2001). Hence “it is never too late to move to two-way communications” (Deegan, 2001: 42).

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