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The Powers in PowerPoint: Embedded authorities, documentary tastes, and institutional (second) orders in corporate Korea

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Abstract

Microsoft PowerPoint is both the bane and banality of contemporary South Korean office work. Corporate workers spend countless hours refining and crafting plans, proposals, and reports in PowerPoint that often lead to conflicts with coworkers and overtime work. This article theorizes the excessive attention to documents in modern office contexts. Where scholars have been under the impression that institutional documents align with institutional purposes, I describe a context in which making documents for individual purposes and making them for work exist under a basic tension. Based on fieldwork in corporate Korea between 2013 and 2015, I describe how Korean office workers calibrate documents to the tastes of superiors who populate the managerial chain. These practices leave little trace of real "work" on paper, but they are productive for navigating complex internal labor markets and demonstrating a higher order value of attention toward others. These findings suggest that institutional and individual authorities are not competing projects inside organizations but become entangled in increasingly complex participatory encounters, even as they are channeled through a seemingly simple software like PowerPoint.

Keywords: South Korea, documents, technology, PowerPoint, expertise, authority

Assistant Manager So-yeon leaned over to my desk and doodled a cartoon pig in my field notebook. She was covertly depicting her direct boss, Team Manager Park, seated a few desks away and unaware of the silent slight. So-yeon, normally in charge of employee training at the Sangdo Group, was at the time laboring over the "2015 HR Development Team Annual Plan." The document, drafted entirely in PowerPoint, had been requested by So-yeon's and Team Manager Park's boss, Executive Cho. Team Manager Park oversaw So-yeon's work on the slides and it was he who delivered them to Executive Cho for review. Cho, however, kept demanding revisions from Park who in turn passed along the demands to So-yeon and a teammate. Over a period of a few weeks, the team of three reworked the document after hours, over the weekend, and once even all night to meet Cho's exacting, but shifting, specifications. Fellow members of the Human Resources team looked on with dismay and concern for their co-workers' health, and with some derision over the fuss paid to an internal document. After two weeks and no final approval on how the document should be structured and written, Executive Cho halted the production on a document he himself had ordered.

In South Korea (henceforth Korea), Microsoft's PowerPoint software has become deeply integrated into white-collar office worlds. The digital slide-share program, originally developed in the United States in 1987 as a replacement for overhead slides, has enjoyed widespread dissemination in its brief history. More than just technological diffusion around the world, PowerPoint has become enregistered as – that is, become taken as a way to convey – a legitimate mode of office documentation and global practice. Diverse office functions like human resources, strategy, marketing, production management, sales, and others use PowerPoint and its recognizable genres to embed work, spanning numerous institutional contexts: business offices, government offices, schools, universities, and even militaries (Yates and Orlikowski 2007; Galloway 2011; Kaplan 2011; Robles-Anderson and Svensson 2016). In Korea, where PowerPoint has been sold since the early 1990s, using Microsoft's PowerPoint over another modality, such as the Korean software Hangul Office, can signal an office's integration with global documentation norms. At the same time, PowerPoint has also become enregistered as a way to shape the subjects of those who use it: analysts, consultants, and potential recruits draw, and draw on, PowerPoint to mediate their working selves, often in the capacity as knowledgeable experts (Knoblauch 2008, 2012). (Even the current President of Korea, Moon Jae-in, used a simulcast PowerPoint presentation in a 2017 speech in front of the National Assembly.) In Korea, to excel at PowerPoint can earn one the label "god of presenting" (balpyo-ui sin),[i] a moniker conveying a person's seemingly effortless coordination of oral and visual charisma and knack for earning favorable evaluations from audiences and readers.[ii]

Despite the widespread enregisterment of these two orders – to document organizational knowledge anonymously and to display the individual skills of its users – the practicalities of document production inside organizations, mediated as such by multiple stages of production, complex managerial hierarchies,[iii] and anonymously written documents, frequently muddle the empirical separability of these two orders. Nevertheless, their ideological persistence remains a constant source of tension, one that repeatedly converges in the context of PowerPoint documents: So-yeon and her team confronted the challenge of creating a plan that would satisfy the demands of internal knowledge standards, but also one that would make them look good as a team. In the end, they created a plan that appeared to satisfy neither. This article tackles how institutional and individual authorities converge and intersect over a document technology that seems to frequently fail at delineating both. I aim to show that such failures are not an under-attunement of a global technology to cultural or social contexts, but rather an over-attunement by office workers to the complex politics now mediated by PowerPoint.

Anthropologists have provided different accounts for why institutional documentation projects appear to fail – the role of materiality (M. Hull 2012), the necessity of reaching consensus (Riles 1998), problems of translation and legibility (Jacob 2007), and paradoxes within ideologies themselves (E. Hull 2012). We have also highlighted how soul-less bureaucratic processes must be re-animated by the charisma of culture and sociality to make them inhabitable (Göpfert 2013; Nading 2016). This article confronts a group of actors – white-collar Korean corporate office workers – who broadly share the same views about the importance of formal documentation to organizational functioning, the importance of individual recognition at work, and the role of digital technologies for mediating these efforts – that is, who have no qualms about office work or documentation. This article suggests that these institutional actors disagree about how this authority should be translated into documentary styles and whose style counts. The ethnographic problem I highlight for Korean office workers is not whether a technology like PowerPoint has corrupted existing office literacies or made work soulless; rather, it is how to succeed within a bottleneck where multiple powers converge in the narrow channel of the PowerPoint slide. To succeed requires reading and interpreting the minds and feelings of those who have institutional authority over the control of documents. It entails learning how to translate those into a textual-visual format where colors, charts, arrangements, wordings, sequencings, and visual arrangements are crucial. For some, lengthy and detailed PowerPoints are appropriate, while for others short and colorful will suffice. Navigating the politics of the Korean office means learning to properly embed the authorities of others and making one's contribution known in subtle ways. While agreeing in principle with Park & Bucholtz's notion that "the process of entextualization is essential for the reproduction of institutional authority" (2009: 487) and that texts give shape to modern organizations (Harper 1998), this article suggests that even as PowerPoint has become enregistered as an authoritative medium for much office work, and even as certain genres, like plans, reports, and proposals, have become conventionalized in PowerPoint, the production of any individual document is a social event of heightened importance, not only for what it says, but what it says about those involved in making it.

By focusing on the convergence of institutional ideologies for documentation and individuation at the level of PowerPoint making, this article poses questions for how anthropologists frame conflicts of individuality and institutionality more generally. Institutional will and individual freedom are commonly understood to be separate and inherently in conflict (Fleming 2013), where institutions like bureaucracies or corporations act like persons that reproduce themselves in particular ways (Best 2012). However, modern organizational workers associate their selves with institutions along gradient degrees of authority and belonging and are regularly involved in the production of institutional knowledge that also implicates themselves. In contemporary Korea, organization-internal conflicts are not about institutions against individuals, but institutions as particular individuals, such as chairmen (hoejang) who appear to have psychic control over their employees, executives whose decisions can sway the stress levels of hundreds below, or individual team managers who may coercively or normatively control the social lives of team members.[iv] Pig-drawing So-yeon was not complaining about corporate culture as an abstract force over her life, but rather Team Manager Park and Executive Cho's mis-interpretations of what degree of textual refinement was necessary – and what sacrifices could be demanded – for an internal document. Part of the problem, then, has been a dual attention to salient signs of institutionality – anonymity, objectivity, textuality – and salient signs of individuality – style, voice, creativity – as inherently distinct forces. While attention has been paid to how individual style animates bureaucratic documents (e.g., Göpfert [2013]), less focus has been paid to the ways that not the ways that institutional-internal documents are themselves "crafted," to use Nading's (2015) phrase.

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Korea where I worked as an intern-slash-researcher at the Sangdo Holdings company (pseudonym), the headquarters of the Sangdo Group, a multi-national Korean steel conglomerate, between 2014 and 2015, in addition to interviews and media analysis in the Korean corporate world. I argue two main points: first, that institutional authorities emerge around the participatory affordances of document-crafting, not the authority of texts as singular objects nor detached performances, and second, that a key mode of grounding authorities in texts is successfully embedding the tastes of others in them – that is, by making individual styles appear as institutional productions. Focusing on the participatory stages of document-crafting reveals how fractions of authority emerge across different roles, from drafters who demonstrate their creativity on the slide, to managers who exercise their ability to scrutinize documents, and to executives who demonstrate their vision by commissioning documents in the first place. Such a focus aims to demonstrate not that idealized formal orders comes into conflict with the realities of social context, but that institutional actors have to regularly embed office politics into their slides.

Corporate Korea provides a fruitful domain for exploring this phenomenon because of the general pattern of stratified managerial hierarchies as well as social conventions for enacting the authority of others through a register of honorification, deference, and respect. In the office, this is reflected in how employees tailor document styles, contents, and delivery to the tastes or concerns of superiors, creating an economy for awareness of and concern for others. In contrast to an American PowerPoint software that was originally developed to streamline the division of labor between idea-makers and visual-creators, reanimating the liberal, creative subject (see Gaskins [2012]), Korean employees and teams overelaborate these divisions, by repeatedly editing, checking, and approving PowerPoints documents. Western critics have depicted the PowerPoint slide as lacking in rhetorical, aesthetic, or even moral value as it lulls contemporary office workers to sleep or corrupts their moralities (Parker 2001, Tufte 2006). In Korea, PowerPoint is a site of intense social focus, where multiple powers converge – the powers above, the power to demonstrate one’s skill, the power of work as a status-marker – bringing heightened attention to what documents say and, more importantly, what they say about their writers, readers, and handlers. Such attention to others over seemingly non-productive work is reflected in global labor statistics: Korean workers spend world-leading time at work (OECD 2018) but are simultaneously dubbed with having perennial “low productivity.”[v]

In what follows, I first describe how enactments of *others’* authority is not just a cultural convention but a key way of navigating complex labor organizations in the face of obscure job prospects within white-collar environments. I then describe the skill that employees develop as they move along office hierarchies is not one of greater technical skill at writing PowerPoints, but of reading and interpreting others, skills narrated by employees and marketed in self-help guides. I then turn to the ways that managers and executives find their own expertise inhibited by the PowerPoint habits of others. Lastly, I describe three cases of actors who attempt to navigate their way out of the PowerPoint economy, with some attempting to get rid of PowerPoint all together.

KOREAN INSTITUTIONS AND THE AUTHORITY OF OTHERS

Large industrial conglomerates, such as the Samsung Group or POSCO Group, have been relatively stable figures on the Korean economic landscape since the 1970s (Kim and Park 2011). Their internal dynamics are anything but stable, however: pyramid-like organizations annually hire and promote large cohorts of new members who are evaluated, promoted, or filtered out over the course of their careers. Even for prestige “regular workers” (jeong-gyu jik), who have passed entry exams and receive higher salaries and benefits, internal labor markets remain competitive, with annual performance evaluations and formal tests for rank-promotion every four or five years. Long-term employees may reach high-salaried managerial positions in their mid- to late-careers, and in exceptional circumstances, achieve executive positions, yet the prospects of lifetime employment at a single company exist for only a select few. Even for owners of family-owned conglomerates (so-called chaebol), though not following the same career paths as the general workforce, succession can be competitive and subject to intense scrutiny. Claims over the rightful seats of ownership frequently lead to bitter internecine battles and company spin-offs.[vi] Though corporations have a legal existence separate from their employees and owners, the issue of who can rightfully be employed at and represent corporate organizations remains an ongoing concern at all levels.

In theory, the operation of companies and the evaluation of members should follow two different processes: the creation of anonymous, depersonalized corporate knowledge on one hand, and the evaluation of members' contributions on the other. This separation has become ideologically more salient in the advent of the "performance era" (seong-gwajui sidae), in which promotions aimed to be judged by one's merit and performance, not pure seniority. A range of new HR techniques emerged since the early 2000s which sought to affix objective performance evaluations onto individual work, such as through letter grades, metrics, or other indices including "Key Performance Indicators" (KPIs), disentangling individual performance from work so it could be properly evaluated (cf. Chumley 2013). These are technocratic attempts to separate what we might classify as the first-order of labor (work itself) from its second-order inferences (a worker's contribution).[vii]

These two orders can never be completely "purified" from each other, however. Even scrubbed of authorship, documents bear indexical traces of those who ordered them, those who worked on them, and those who last touched them. Individual performance metrics, too, such as annual performance grades, are filled out, decided, and approved by individual managers and executives. Managers and executives themselves are also evaluated on abstract criteria, such as leadership qualities, team morale, or team effectiveness that link their own individual work to the performance of a group. While certain sites, such as the after-work drinking event (hoesik), occupy an ideologically salient position in imagining Korean organizational politics away from the formal, first-order level of work, everyday activities like drafting documents are potent sites for encountering tensions over the individual and the institutional.

If in Western contexts, second-order inferences of labor are linked to qualities of the self (such as ego-grounding performances), Korean norms of authority are premised on acknowledging *others'* authority: the authority of a chairman, executive, manager, and so on, is enacted by his or her subordinates. In the context of the office, these norms are captured in the term nunchi bogi or "glance-watching." Nunchi bogi refers to the skill one has at observing the mood of a situation, a group, or a superior, and anticipating the situationally appropriate thing to do, usually accommodating the tastes or needs of a superior. Properly demonstrating nunchi involves seamlessly carrying out a necessary action without making its necessity visible. The archetypical example involves not leaving work until after one's boss has also left, while claiming to do (unnecessary) work.[viii] To do nunchi properly is to make one's self look good by possessing both concern for others and social graces to not draw attention to one's own action. Conversely, to accuse someone of not having nunchi brings attention to the fault of others for failing to provide respect to a higher authority or being oblivious to a social mood. Workers who go home at the official quitting time are said to not possess nunchi, for instance. Nunchi represents a gradated skill that one can be more or less adept at, especially as the situations become more interactionally complex or unexpected. Greater degrees of nunchi can be demonstrated in activities that seem not to call for it at all, such as anticipating what a boss might want for lunch on a Thursday or knowing how he or she prefers images to be arranged on a slide.

In this context of both organizational hierarchies and collective production, a complex politics unfolds. A scene in the Korean crime movie The Outlaws (2017) illustrates this well. A police sergeant chides a rookie cop over a report the rookie wrote and submitted directly to the sergeant's boss. The report, which detailed the events of a crime scene, noted that the sergeant came to the crime scene straight from a golf course. This detail was factually "correct" but normatively "wrong": it reflected poorly on the sergeant in the eyes of his superior. It also reflected that the rookie had not been properly socialized on how to "write" a police report; he should have learned to leave out facts that might implicate his boss referentially. Green-eared employees may receive scoldings from mid-level employees, but mid-level employees are also beholden to the ways their junior employees write about them. Just as Executive Cho could command So-yeon and her teammates below in the Sangdo HR department, he himself was captured by how they wrote their slides. As one moves up in a Korean organizational hierarchy, the production of writing becomes inversely proportional to rank: lower-level employees are more responsible for writing content but are less responsible for its commitments; higher-level managers can be directly responsible for the commitments of a document but may not be involved at all in its production. These generate "moral mazes" (Jackall 2010) in the office which unfold around shared work and divided responsibilities, made more complicated by their condensation around the largely singular textual medium and neutral office register of PowerPoint documents.

The creation of institutional documents – the entextualization process – is an often overlooked interactional and bureaucratic achievement: many documents like So-yeon's annual plan are never completed or undergo multiple rounds of seemingly useless edits from the point of view of first-order content. Bosses may intercede to make sure nothing bad reflects on them or that documents are properly tailored to those above. In an online survey of office workers (see footnote seven, above), respondents noted that they were most on edge around bosses who "watch their own bosses and change their minds frequently," and "are perfectionists about even small details." The perceived malfunctioning of the office at the level of textual content is arguably its proper functioning at a higher-order of other-oriented authority.

Even as the Korean labor market has increasingly selected for iconic representations of neoliberal subjects to get into companies (see Abelmann et al., 2009; Park 2010), once in an office, employees become concerned with how to link themselves with successful superiors, teams, or divisions. New employees worry about how to grab a "line" (jul or ra-in) with bosses who have the hot hand and mid-level employees worry about how to remain on them. Lines can be made or unmade in practice, as individuals mark indexical traces of document production, from dedicating (over)time on a document, to hand-delivering a printed file to a superior, to simply chipping in on slide creation. These acts leave no trace to individuals in the final entextualized document but serve as covert "signs of recognition" (Keane 1997) if performed successfully. Such acts of attention underlie the more complex process and skill needed to pick up on superiors' documentary tastes.

DOCUMENTARY TASTES AND "CATCHING" A STYLE

In Figure 1 below, a cartoon from the Korean newspaper Hankyung depicts two employees divided over what constitutes a proper "report" (bogoseo). The narrative accompanying the cartoon tells the story of the assistant manager, on the right, who was scolded for his style of report writing. He encountered problems because:

> he didn't follow Company A's set rules for reports: font: Batang, font size: 13, line spacing: 160%, color: grayscale, and so on. He thought that if he made the report so that one could understand the contents, that would be okay, but he got culture shock at these so-called "regulations."

[Figure 1]

The assistant manager associates a report with its content in mind, but he did not heed the company's regulations for document drafting. The cartoon implies that rules are arbitrary and outdated – associated with older forms of formal drafting, not modern PowerPoint – and merely a matter of the personal discretion of the older manager to enforce them. In this sense, the assistant manager must now learn to adapt to the "company's" style, but he must also learn that this is how this boss prefers documents. Later in the account, the assistant manager was reported to coerce other co-workers to check over his PowerPoint reports prior to delivering them to the fickle manager.

The cartoon paints a clear picture of two office types, recognizable by subtle identity cues. The clash between an emotionally volatile, company-loyal older manager and the young, globally-oriented, ideas-based younger manager instantiates a productive generational trope in the Korean office: old versus new, rules versus creativity, senior versus junior (Prentice, n.d.). This clash is precipitated and mediated by decisions around competing tastes: those that adhere to company "rules" versus those that have merit through their own "content." The implication is that such a generational mis-calibration between juniors and seniors is blocking the success of Korean companies and a key source of office headaches.

In actual offices, conflicts do not happen across such recognizable sociological figures and binary encounters; rather, employees attune to the particular personalities and tastes of their managers to create and deliver documents, requiring extensive work to both grasp and make manifest in a given document. Companies like Sangdo have their own internal rules (sanae gyujeong) that specify pro-forma rules about document formatting (such as font sizes, line spacing, and margins), but such rules can hardly cover the aesthetic and genre variations potent in any possible PowerPoint document. Moreover, the indexed qualities of such documents (timing, materiality, presentation) is rarely elevated to the level of official commentary. Employees regularly attune to this information, however, as they are socialized in the office. During my fieldwork at Sangdo Holdings, Executive Cho asked me to write a report for him about HR strategies during mergers and acquisitions (M&A). I asked Assistant Manager Ji-soon, So-yeon's teammate, who was known for making organized and aesthetically clean PowerPoint documents, for advice. She sent me the following email:

> **Excerpt 1: Email from Ji-soon**
> Hello,
> I am forwarding you a template example for use with reporting to Executive Cho. A story that is logical, contents that are structured, and a conclusion that is clear (as a tool for making decisions) is a report of this style. Please refer to the structure!
>
> Thank you.

Attached to her email was a Sangdo PowerPoint template that had guidelines on the appropriate use of arrows, font sizes, colors, and some basic slide layouts that she herself had made for members of the HR team. More than the aesthetics of the template, the important point was to understand that good documents had a logical and decision-oriented structure to them, and that these qualities were specifically linked to Executive Cho's taste. Thinking I understood this principle, I worked for two weeks trying to make a report that properly summarized HR principles and strategies during an M&A. A subsequent one-on-one meeting with Executive Cho to discuss a draft of the report lasted one hour and he did not move past the second slide I had made, repeatedly pointing out the illogical nature of my proposed argument and illegibility of my diagrams. He did not give any new suggestions for how to re-design it, however. I worked on it for another week on my own. Seeing I was struggling, Team Manager Jang, Ji-soon's boss, told me to just stop working on it, because, despite the apparent gravity of the topic, it was just a pet project of Executive Cho's. That is, it did not matter to the functioning of the company or their team. And indeed, I stopped working on it and no one ever brought it up again. I later found out that while everyone else on the team understood the principle of logical thinking in the abstract, no one knew how to translate such principles into documents that would please Executive Cho on the first draft.[ix] Lengthy scoldings were an uncomfortable ritual within the team. At certain cynical moments of uncertainty, my co-workers scoffed that Executive Cho himself did not know what he wanted.

For more experienced employees, attuning to a superior's style or habits is a basic facet of work and a skill developed quasi-ethnographically. Below is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with a Manager Song who worked at a company where his higher-up bosses rotated frequently. He describes how he "catches" a new boss's style:

> **Excerpt 2: Interview with Manager Song**
> (Discussing production of PowerPoint)
> In our case, generally you have to catch [kaetchi] the style of your direct boss quickly and then match your style when you write something. It's just more convenient. Like if someone starts to work in your department and you need to get a decision [from him], within one month I need to catch how he looks at reports or what style he likes and then I match it. That's how you do it.
>
> (Asked about standardized files)
> There are standardized files on the company intranet, but there are some subtle differences about what [bosses] want. Some people like graphs. As for colors, some people like [reports to be] more colorful. Some people like pictures or models. If I match it, it's easier for me too. If I don't match it, then they always make you redo it.

At a practical level, grasping the taste of a boss is not just about showing off one's own skill, but about getting a decision or approval on a document, often so it can be passed along to a higher authority for further approval or review. In this sense, arranging information into a complex text with clear arguments, evidence, visual layout and readability is a task of anticipatory refinement. In a system of nested ranks like a managerial hierarchy, these acts of refinement continue along the chain of entextualization.[x] A high-ranking executive at Sangdo told me that he himself had developed his own style of presenting documents to the chairman over the course of his career: he made sure to present three clearly distinct options on a slide from which the chairman could choose (he often had a secretarial worker draft the slides for him, to boot). He anticipated a desired interactional position for the chairman, allowing him to make an informed, but simplified, decision without presenting too much or too little information.

There are numerous self-help books in Korea on how to properly make and design PowerPoint reports and presentations, with many of them focused on basics of designing slides and sequencing arguments, with titles like God of Reporting, The Report-writing Guidebook, The Plan Master, The Right Way to Write a Proposal, as well as many others on navigating corporate politics in general, such as Forty-one Tactics to Survive the Office and Fifty Techniques Middle-managers Should Know. The books often over-dramatize the stakes of individual documents, such as one that declares, "the moment of reporting can decide your fate." Nevertheless, the books advocate that success in submitting documents comes from developing both attunement to the needs of superiors and development of contextual cues indicate one's own contribution. In the case of the former, the book Seven Principles of Reporting describes a difference between two kinds of narrative arcs in documents: dugwalsik or "head-oriented style" in which the main point or arguments come at the beginning of a PowerPoint, and migwalsik or "tail-oriented style" in which the main arguments come at the end after a long, evidence-based build-up. The book argues that it is best to adopt a head-oriented style, for two reasons: one, so that the busy reader, such as one's boss, can both see (visually) and get to (sequentially) the point quickly and easily; it also shows off one's main contribution more readily. In the case of contextual cues, a book titled Secret Weapons that Work at Work suggests that employees attune to the moments around reporting, particularly to the needs of one's direct boss:

> **Excerpt 3: Key "points" for discovering secret weapons at work**
>
> *"Find out and report on what is the information that the other person (boss) needs."*
>
> *"Make reports primarily based on what the boss is interested in."*
>
> *"To become a talented person who's good at work, the art of listening is crucial."*
>
> *"Reports should be just like a loop always creating a connection to the next thing."*
>
> *"In an 'All thanks to my manager…!' style, deftly lower yourself and humbly communicate to your boss."*

Secret Weapons notes that employees should attune to features of language from bosses that are not even spoken: "an order that isn't an order is still an order." An informant who was a mid-level manager at another company described this practice as finding the bonsim or "true feelings" (Sino-Korean: 本心) of higher-ups. Bonsim goes beyond acts of speaking or even actual thoughts, indicating what someone can truly feel inside. This process of interactional anticipation and mind-reading is captured in the diagram in Figure 2 below, from the book God of Reporting. The neo-Saussurian diagram depicts not the exchange of communication, but the exchange of thoughts: the diagram recommends an alignment between the requested topic and the response (the document itself) as well as the "writing person" and the "reading person." Writers should "grasp" (pa-ak) the problem while making sure the request and the document "act as one" (ilchi). The generalized interactional role categories ("writing person" and "reading person") reflect how this general dyadic relationship can be imagined across different ranks, authorities, and document genres.

[Figure 2]

To the degree that Korean office workers attune so well to norms of other-orientation and their interactional and material translations, why would documents ever get stopped up or fail? Ordering reports or making revisions is also a means of demonstrating one's authority. To be a superior who does not evaluate, edit, or correct at all, is to be a superior with no authority. In the cartoon in Figure 1, the recourse to "company regulations" represented the last bastion of authority for an older manager outsmarted by a younger generation. Opportunities for obstruction can take place over different moments: there is a stereotype of "red pen" (bbalggan pen) managers who mark-up documents excessively, akin to school teachers correcting their students. There are managers who are known for being "fastidious" (ggomggomhan) in re-checking figures and numbers and second-guessing their own employees. And there are mangers who can hold "marathon meetings" (maraton hoe-ui) to review documents at length. The performative necessity of such authoritative intermediation is not insignificant. To approve everything and review nothing reveals that one has no authority at all. A colleague at Sangdo recounted a story of a team manager who had been cut out of his team's document drafting process. A junior manager simply gave his documents directly to the executive above, skipping over his team manager. The junior manager avoided accusations of subversion by saying he wanted to respect the team manager's time. The team manager understood this lack of work as a sign that he had been shunned. The writing was on the wall, and he later resigned.[xi]

Anthropological accounts of the aestheticization of documents have often focused on what they say about their writers, in line with accounts of style more generally (cf. Irvine 2001). Göpfert (2013) notes, for instance, that in Niger, "gendarmes [military police] want to prove to themselves, their colleagues, and their superiors that they can carry the reputation and the self-image of writing intellectuals" (330) in the artful drafting of police reports. In corporate Korea, one's orientation to the tastes, personalities, and even future feeling states of superiors in the drafting of seemingly neutral documents like plans, reports, and proposals, reveals much in turn about one's own social skills. The overlaying of personal qualities onto conventional textual qualities also brings them into alignment with superficially institutional goals, shielding the personal politics and interests behind any given document.

MANAGERS IN MEDIAS RES

For managers or executives in large organizations, to be at the receiving end of such documents is a mark of institutional authority, but it also entails being at the whims of those below and being constrained in the types of actions available to take. For instance, M. Hull (2012: 160) describes how a low-level functionary in Pakistan tricked a higher-level bureaucrat into signing documents that he had not read carefully. In this section, I focus on how a team of high-level managers at Sangdo found their own authority paradoxically constrained in a process they were in charge of.

A hallway down from Human Resources, the Performance Management Team of Sangdo Holdings oversaw productivity and sales across the group's subsidiaries. This oversight was mediated by a "monthly management report" (wolgan gyeong-yeong bogoseo) that each Sangdo company was responsible for submitting up to the chairman and ownership. When I shadowed the team in 2015, three assistant members, a team manager, and a new executive were revamping the monthly reporting process. At issue for the team was how to create a PowerPoint template that subsidiaries could produce within a narrow time frame and limited textual space that could also accurately summarize their key events each month, such as sales, new clients, or key indicators in their supply lines. To be legible for the chairman, each report was meant to be three to five PowerPoint slides long. The Performance Management Team would also have to submit the document quickly after the end of each month, lest the reports and the information become "trash" (sseuregi), in the words of one team member.

I participated in a pair of lengthy team meetings organized by the team executive to discuss the new report template. This was more than simply capturing first-order information about manufacturing and sales activities. In the meetings, the team attempted to align the chairman's anticipated "needs" (nijeu) with the format of the template itself. Because they did not know exactly what the chairman would need, they debated how to translate different pieces of information into the textual specifics of a PowerPoint report template (the meeting itself was also organized in PowerPoint). A key issue was how to translate pieces of others' expertise into their own "epistemic jurisdiction" (Boyer 2008). One of their discussions centered on what "ratio" of quantitative and qualitative information should be in the report, such as "60:40" "80:20," or "40:60." Quantitative information like sales information was useful and easy to assemble directly from subsidiaries, but it would not provide any interpretation over what the data meant. Qualitative information, like analyses of market trends or explanatory remarks about increases or decreases in sales, would be more beneficial to interpreting the data; it would also demonstrate the team's own expertise. Qualitative-heavy reports, however, came with risks: they would require subjective interpretation, more information gathering, and a longer production time to analyze data and make consistently useful insights. One manager voiced concern about the commitments they might be unwittingly signing up for: what if they merely gave the same insights every month? Thus, they were not concerned only about the relation between the primary source data and its synechdochal summary to the chairman (that is, what or how it was represented); they were also concerned with the second-order readings about how their own labor and expertise would be read as well.

Doing a more “value-added” approach (with more qualitative data to allow interpretation of the quantitative data) would take longer, meaning the chairman and other owners might not see the reports until the twelfth day of each month. The executive believed this would make the reports useless as it would be too late to make use of the information on a month-by-month basis. Asking subsidiaries to submit the information in a shorter period, such as at a fixed date each month, might risk employees having to work on weekends or holidays to meet deadlines. This fact seemed particularly salient to the younger managers who deemed it unfair to make others work over holidays. The executive had less sympathy. He considered excuses for being late, including national holidays, suspicious. He harbored some skepticism towards the subsidiaries and their motivations, calling them at one point “rotten excuse-makers” (birin naemse naneun bbenjjiri), suggesting they were trying to hide poor results from the chairman by delaying the reports.

In one of the meetings, the executive emphasized to the team the importance of the physical act of delivering the report to the chairman. If the executive were to deliver the numbers with no analysis but on time, then there would be no value for their team; they would be merely conduits. As figurative extensions of the chairman, however, they should come up with some analysis to include in the report, to demonstrate their expertise and validate their own positions. As they debated what kinds of qualitative information to include, one joked that including too much information would resemble a school textbook. Thick reports, however, were the preferences of one of the members of the ownership team below the chairman, another chimed in. Even if it exceeded the chairman’s expectations for shorter reports, it might be better to covertly address it to the other owner’s tastes, even though he was not the official addressee. The other owner, they reasoned, was the one who made the real decisions.

The Performance Management team found itself in an organizational logjam. Their very position was premised on collating and submitting a report that could visually condense information about subsidiary performance for the chairman’s eyes. This logjam was felt both text-internally, in terms of what content to include, and text-externally, in terms of deadlines, turn-around times, and modes of delivery. That disagreement arose within the team is not surprising: the executive, who reported directly to the chairman, was adamant that the Performance Management Team make its expert impact known, lest they (or he) be seen as non-experts. For the junior members, they faced a nested risk within their own team: the burden of producing insights was up to them. They would be responsible for tracking down subsidiaries who submitted documents late or incorrectly, tracking market trends, and interpreting quantitative data – and likely working on the weekends. The potential for failure on their part might bring into doubt their own suitability within their team.

Why could the team not ask the chairman what he wanted or ask the subsidiaries what was reasonable? It was the job of the Performance Management Team to attune to this as a condition of their expertise, purportedly the highest in the whole group. It was also a condition of their expertise to institute discipline and order onto the subsidiaries whose performance results were viewed skeptically by those above. Monthly management reporting was not just a way of gathering information, but the process itself was a form of documentary discipline whose levers could be adjusted to increase control at the headquarters (in much the same way that Wall Street exercises control over publicly traded corporations by demanding frequent and extensive quarterly reports). Yet in Sangdo's case, it was the elite team itself that became consumed by the creation of such a template and its production, engaging in marathon meetings discussing the details of a PowerPoint template and debating what kinds of documentary commitments they would be crafting for themselves.

MITIGATING THE POWERS IN POWERPOINT

Not all office workers commit to the traps of working over PowerPoint documents to appease others. Some even revolt against it. In this section, I look at three different institutional responses for mitigating the powers in PowerPoint.

Across from Team Manager Park (So-yeon's boss) was Team Manager Jang (Ji-soon's boss). The two team managers oversaw different HR functions and both formally reported to Executive Cho. Both had followed similar educational and career paths to come to Sangdo Holdings. Where Park had worked as a consultant in a US-linked consulting firm, Jang had worked in HR management at a large Korean manufacturing company for his entire career. Their career trajectories shaped their attitudes to work in general, and documentation in particular. Jang, the HR Planning manager, had been habituated to the flow of salaried office life, vertical hierarchies, and complex internal politics inside a conglomerate. Park approached his work as a consultant, seeing work as projects for a paying client. Projects should be done based on a division of expertise and employees should work should as long as necessary to meet deadlines.

The key product – the PowerPoint document – should be delivered to and evaluated by Executive Cho. For Park, reports required a high attention to detail, for they acted as travelling icons of their work output, and by extension, his team's expertise.

Team Manager Jang was aware of the risks of the consultant style of PowerPoint. In his previous company, he had heard many outside consultants whose slides were, in his words, fancier than the actual solutions they offered. He saw his job not as based around discrete "deliverables" but as part of a program-building for the HR team and Sangdo Group in general. This included developing innovative HR systems around salary and promotion programs, as well as guiding the careers of the three team members under his charge. None of these things could be captured in a single PowerPoint document; rather, they took place over the course of years and with long-term discussion and diplomacy at the Sangdo subsidiaries and group ownership. To Jang, Executive Cho was not the final arbiter in this process, but a hindrance. Jang confided to me and others how Executive Cho unnecessarily obsessed over the fine details of presentations, opinions which were valid in their own right, but often unnecessary for getting things done, not to mention harmful to employees' working lives, occasionally leading to major arguments over documents. Reporting, particularly internal reporting, was merely an occasion to have a discussion, with the owners and with subsidiary managers, around which different projects could be worked and reworked. In this sense, while texts are the result of an entextualization process with superficially institutional purposes, their mere presence often occasions new contexts for talk and action (Haviland 1996; Nozawa 2007).[xii]

Requests for PowerPoint documents could not be totally avoided, however, but they could be manipulated. When projects required feedback from Executive Cho, Jang would take print-outs by himself to shield his team members from any scolding and to better negotiate a project going forward. One of Jang's favorite moves was to use the complications of one report to delay or simplify another ongoing project, buying concessions from Executive Cho. On occasion, he also could get passing approvals from the CEO in the hallway as a way to mitigate Cho's anticipatory quibbling. On other occasions, Team Manager Jang downplayed his own team's expert position by sharing files directly with subsidiary managers to get their feedback together or by presenting them as sales pitches, reversing the assumed power relations of the headquarters expert who commands those below.

For others, PowerPoint itself represents deeper problems to business operations. When I interviewed Senior Advisor Jung, a semi-retired consigliere in the Sangdo Group, my planned questions on the history of the group quickly diverted into his own pet theory on documentation reform which was elaborated on a large white board in his office. He saw the Sangdo conglomerate as deeply flawed, with one of the reasons stemming from myriad forms of documentation, related in part to Koreans' unwillingness to share and work for the collective good. He himself had become an adherent of the American "lean management" approach which focuses on core elements of manufacturing operations (cash flow, cost accounting, profit margins, and so on), making every employee responsible for these. In his view, Sangdo managers focused too much attention on PowerPoint documents, leading to wasted time and distorted views of baseline information. He advocated instead that the entire management chain be simplified by only using a one-page document listing efficiency metrics straight from the factory floors, suggesting a closer calibration between objective (first-order) information, the medium of documentation, and its final addressee. These one-pagers would go directly to the chairman, so he could see the "ground floor" (hyeonjang) of his business. This would obviate the need for the entire middle manager infrastructure in his view. Importantly, such a document would not be editing: it would be a plain depiction of productive efficiency imagined through numeric metrics – the opposite of the highly stylized PowerPoint (cf. Zaloom 2003: 264-265). Despite the fervor of his ideas (and their early success at one small factory), his own office had been relegated from the thirty-ninth floor to the third floor of the Sangdo Tower to make way for a new executive in the holding company. For Jung to claim that the group should minimize its modes of documentation and reliance on PowerPoint was a position that precisely shut him out of the internal economy he was criticizing. Moral high grounds can be reached by stair, it seems.

More extreme measures have been taken: in 2016, the South Korean credit card giant Hyundai Card declared war on PowerPoint in an internal campaign called "Zero PPT." The campaign was aimed at eliminating the use of PowerPoint (or PPT for short) for the company's three-thousand-person workforce. [xiii] The campaign slogan was "Let's not work for the sake of making reports," reflecting a sentiment that time spent on PowerPoint reports was "excessive" and that company culture had simply transformed into a "culture of reports" (bogoseo munhwa). Hyundai Card employees were encouraged to make reports in other programs like Excel, limit them to one or two pages, and make them "argument-centered." Company computers were even re-programmed to prevent PowerPoint slides from being created at all; existing PowerPoints were set to read-only. According to company CEO Chung Tae-young's public announcement on Facebook, the "Zero PPT" program saved fifty million pieces of paper and untold hours of meetings over the its first year (Figure 3 below).

[Figure 3]

The allusion to a "culture of reports" makes clear that the emphasis is not on the technological medium per se, but how report writing through PowerPoint was contributing to unnecessary documentation, particularly in ways that punished report writers. This criticism reflects other normative restrictions on exchange practices run amok in Korea in which dyadic modes of both demonstrating authority and signaling deference appear to outstrip their basic social functions, such as excessive gift-giving or consumer purchasing (Kendall 1996; Nelson 2000). Despite the breadth of the Zero PPT program (and its public relations fanfare), Hyundai Card's approach, like Senior Advisor Jung's, still rested on an assumption that institutional functioning could be fine-tuned through just the right forms of documentation, not the total removal of documentation altogether. For Hyundai, this simply meant reports in other media: Excel documents, one-page reports, or in some cases face-to-face or telephone reporting.[xiv] Such efforts appear as noble attempts at reducing Korea's seemingly out of control work hours. Yet we can look at them another way: a mode for aligning one's personal preferences as institutional goals, while minimizing the ability of others to have their own say in the matter.

CONCLUSION

The powers that inhere in PowerPoint are not the powers of PowerPoint. Whereas communications and media scholars have often looked at the enabling and constraining aspects of PowerPoint as both technology and genre in the ways it has infiltrated a diverse range of institutions (Kernbach et al. 2015), in this article I have argued that an anthropological analysis can reveal how a software can become an institutionally privileged circuit for channeling different orders of value. I have referred to these as tensions over first-order information (reports, plans, and proposals) and second-order information (inferences about those who make them). Interestingly, both a labor theory of value and business theories of immediate communication converge in believing that these two orders can be separated and measured. This article has shown that not only are they difficult to separate in the context of organizations premised on the shared production of documents, but that normative values can make their distinctions intentionally invisible. By putatively sacrificing one's labor for the organization itself, individuals can signal their fealty to specific individuals. To Korean office workers who find themselves endlessly revising PowerPoint documents ordered by their bosses, the issue is not that PowerPoint mediates this relationship with its endless visual information, but which relationships become mediated – or exacerbated – by it.

Modern organizational orders, not just managerial corporations, are premised on the production of first-order information that is delinked from the authors that compose them, from accounting statements to government reports. Second-order interference is seen as parasitic of, or at least oppositional to, efforts to produce "real" information. Information divorced from its human influence is a distinction as old as Weber. Efforts to impose new kinds of order, however, appear as a way to naturalize other systems as absent interference. Western critiques of Korean corporate life are particularly derisive in this regard, often framing the Korean economy as an inability to separate business (first-order) from culture itself (a second-order interference): Korean corporations are too riddled by internal status politics to operate efficiently, too tied to family-style management, and too polite to make note of even imminent dangers (see Gladwell 2008: 177-223). Such criticisms frame Western capitalist-organizational practice as sufficiently normal and unmarked in its efforts for rational documentation and depiction of the market, thus ignoring the ways that Western office spaces are equally shaped by second-order norms bleeding into first-order ones (see Ho 2009: 73-121). The larger aim of this paper has been to suggest that conflicts between these two orders of documentation are not simply embedded in culture (with all respect to Polanyi) in non-Western places like Korea, but that such tensions are inherent to modern organizational forms premised on both the collective production of objective information on one hand and the individuation of status and membership on the other. The case of Korean PowerPoints suggests that the work of aligning these second-order signs into the production of first-order information entails its own kind of social crucible within the office.

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NOTES

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[i] This article uses Revised Romanization (or "RR") in the transcription of Korean to English.

[ii] See Park (2010) for a broader discussion of the naturalization of linguistic competencies in South Korea and its associations with neoliberal contradictions for both hard work and natural skills.

[iii] In Korea, these include five non-executive roles that are conventionally standardized for office workers across the private sector: sawon, daeri, gwajang, chajang, and bujang. At the executive level, peopled positions may vary, but typically include executives (sangmu, isa), presidents or CEOs (sajang, daepyo), as well as vice chairmen and chairmen (buhoejang, hoejang).

[iv] This is not to make the reductive point that corporations or organizations should be reduced to people and not materials or discourses (see Bashkow [2014] for critiques of this position), but rather that such "compositional" views are frequently how actors come to understand institutions. For instance, most public (and legal) discourse reifies corporations as distinct, unified social actors, Korea being no exception; within corporations, however, internal perceptions of managerial hierarchies rarely reify corporate action as separate from specific offices or powerful individuals.

[v] "Korea's labor productivity ranks low in the OECD" Korea Joongang Daily, May 7, 2018. Source: http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3047785

[vi] One of the most famous cases involved the Hyundai Group, which upon founder Chung Ju-yung's death in 2001, found itself without a clear successor to the then-largest corporate group in Korea. Competing claims to succession by surviving sons – both legitimate and illegitimate – led to Hyundai's so-called "war of princes" in which the group was progressively dismantled into separate conglomerates, including Hyundai-Kia Automotive Group, Hyundai Merchant Marine, and Hyundai Heavy Industries. See Steers (1999).

[vii] See Silverstein (2003) for a detailed linguistic anthropological account of the concept of "orders of indexicality" where inspiration for this framing was drawn.

[viii] In an online survey conducted by website Job Korea, 97% of office workers were said to practice nunchi in the office with the most common examples being "staying at work after official quitting time." Other examples included: "adjusting one's vacation schedule to others," "finding work to do when there is no immediate work," "helping out a team member with urgent work," and "working harder if there is pressure to deliver results." Source: "97% of office works practice nunchi at the office….What's top on the list? Maeil Gyeongje. July 22, 2016. http://news.mk.co.kr/newsRead.php?no=526656&year=2016.

[ix] One of the principles that Executive Cho reiterated was "MECE" or "mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive." The acronym comes from McKinsey & Co's publicly published advice on how to develop PowerPoints. Under MECE logic, one has to identify all possible members of a category (CE) and make sure these members do not overlap with each other (ME).

[x] This reflects widely diffuse models of dyadic authority in South Korean society in which individuals are socialized to see themselves as above or below others by age or rank, practices inculcated even among young children. See Ahn (2016).

[xi] Despite, or perhaps because of, rigid labor laws in Korea that make it difficult to fire individual employees at will, acts of social exclusion or social exiling are an ever-present threat, encapsulated in terms such as wangdda (an excluded person) or ddadollinda (to outcast someone).

[xii] Yates & Orlikowski (2007) describe a practice known as "ghost-sliding" in which American consultants refused to finalize their PowerPoint drafts with clients, so as to avoid explicit commitments to work itself and to keep projects open (and presumably billable).

[xiii] The policy was later extended to sister companies Hyundai Life, Hyundai Capital, and Hyundai Commercial.

[xiv] "Wasting time and labor on report designs, [Hyundai Card] gets rid of PPT and substitutes it with one piece of paper." Chosun Ilbo, June 6, 2016. Source: http://economyplus.chosun.com/special/special_view.php?boardName=C00&t_num=9863.