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## **Conspiracy, Religion, and the Public Sphere: The Discourses of Far-Right Counterpublics in the U.S. and South Korea**

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Much research within the noncritical perspective on the public sphere has been quantitative. To strengthen the argument for an ideologically disinterested approach to the study of publicity and counterpublicity, we use ethnomethodological discourse analysis to analyze how far-right movements claim counterpublicity, or “do being a counterpublic.” Specifically, we study the U.S. pundit Alex Jones and a prayer meeting of South Korean Evangelical Christians. For each, we considered how they created a shared discourse and attempted to change mainstream discourse while claiming being marginalized and different from the mainstream. Across these two case studies, the strategies for “doing being a counterpublic” are similar, even though they use different organizing symbols—conspiracy in the U.S. versus religion in Korea. These case studies show that the functionalist perspective yields benefits to understanding how publicity and counterpublicity are negotiated among various groups of activist citizens.

*Keywords: public sphere, functionalist perspective, counterpublic, discourse analysis, right-wing discourse, conspiracy theories, Korean Christianity*

The bourgeois constitutional state, along with the public sphere as the central principle of its organization, was mere ideology. (Habermas, 1962/1991, p. 125)

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The public sphere is a discursive space that determines the norms of public discussion (Habermas, 1962/1991). It is negotiated and challenged by people who position themselves vis-à-vis this social construct (Warner, 2002). Through acts of activist citizenship, people can aim to disrupt the current scene of citizenship by acting in ways that change the nature of the public sphere (Isin, 2009). Marginalized groups, looking for social inclusion to participate on equal terms as others, have formed counterpublics to produce discourses to challenge the current constitution of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Right-wing and religious movements may face similar rhetorical challenges, as they or their messages can be excluded from public discourse. Some extreme right-wing groups want to limit who can participate in the public sphere, and thus researchers have argued that such groups should not be seen as counterpublics (e.g., Asen, 2009; Duerringer, 2013). Instead, having an antidemocratic character is argued to make the term antipublic more applicable (Cammaerts, 2007; Davis, 2020). However, as participants always theorize their own communication, concepts developed by communication scholars may inform communicative practices outside the context they were designed for (Craig, 1999).

The concept of the public sphere was originally described as an ideological construct to manage public discourse (Habermas, 1962/1991), determined both by material conditions (Habermas's emphasis) and discursive positioning (Warner, 2002). Whenever a group positions itself vis-à-vis a public sphere, it must produce a claim for publicity or counterpublicity. Through such claims, different groups contribute to a constantly shifting center and periphery within the public sphere, where the boundaries of acceptable discussion are continuously challenged and negotiated. Studies have shown that antidemocratic movements can claim marginalization for themselves and engage with mainstream discourse in similar ways as groups pursuing an expansion of the public sphere (e.g., Kaiser, 2017; Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015; Xu, 2020). Thus, far-right groups, regardless of being marginalized in a material sense, can self-identify as counterpublics because they understand the idea of counterpublicity and can adopt the logic of marginalized groups to challenge and disrupt the hegemonic public sphere.

Consequently, following Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2019), we take a functionalist, rather than a critical, approach to the concepts of the public sphere and counterpublics to understand empirically the discursive positioning of the participants in public discourse. That is, we foreground the normative claims made by the participants themselves rather than our own. Through this framework, we aim to understand how right-wing movements make sense of their own communication in situ and characterize how these groups "do being a counterpublic."

This study examines two conservative publics within the political far-right: The U.S. political pundit Alex Jones on his show *InfoWars* and Evangelical Christians attending a "flag rally" in South Korea. Both movements position themselves as a counterpublic. Here, we explore the similar ways in which these two ideologically conservative publics manage to position themselves as oppressed and marginalized within the larger public sphere. We show how each movement positions itself as a marginalized public separated from other conservative movements. We selected these two cases as they are quite different (i.e., Jones is a secular, conservative conspiracy theorist, and the Korean flag rally was held by religious activists). A comparison between these two cases enables us to better theorize how right-wing movements claim counterpublicity across contexts.

We first present some literature on the public sphere and subaltern counterpublics to elucidate the theorizing about counterpublicity. Then, we demonstrate how Alex Jones claims counterpublicity through having conspiracy talk as a central theme on his show. Third, we illustrate how at a South Korean “flag rally,” demonstrators used signs to claim counterpublicity based on their religion. Last, in our discussion, we compare how these two movements “do being a counterpublic,” and thus, while rejected by some scholars (e.g., Asen, 2009; Duerringer, 2013), we claim the existence of right-wing counterpublics. We elucidate what this implies about the theory on the public sphere and counterpublicity in general, as well as the benefits of taking a functionalist perspective.

### **The Public Sphere, Subaltern Groups, and Far-Right Movements**

The “classic” public sphere was conceived as a social institution with its primary goal being the creation of “consensus” via reasonable discussions among equal citizens, ultimately leading to a change in government policy (Habermas, 1962/1991). When instituted, these equal citizens were all male and bourgeois, and thus they and the public sphere they created excluded many people. Of course, the excluded people still engaged in discussions, and Habermas (1962/1991) acknowledged that there were publics, such as the plebeian (p. xviii), but decided not to study these, because over time the bourgeois public sphere came to dominate the other publics (Habermas, 1962/1991). In current democracies, even while the underlying ideology has changed over time to a neoliberal one (Asen, 2017), the normative notions of equality of participation and reasoned discussion are still prevalent, and access, on these normative terms, for marginalized groups into the public sphere has been greatly extended.

The public sphere, from its inception and continuing today, though, has been designed, created, and maintained as an ideological fabrication. Despite its values grounded in the principle of equality, the public sphere has always privileged some people’s interests over others’. By simply stressing its laudable and appealing notions of equality of participation and reasoned discussion, the public sphere nevertheless renders certain people at a disadvantage and voiceless by presuming a certain shared identity and interests. By setting the boundaries for acceptable debate, and common sense thinking of ordinary people, some modes of presentation are forced out of public discourse and certain groups are unable to raise their interests (Fraser, 1990). The bourgeoisie, through the construction (and expansion) of their public sphere, ultimately controlled the social situation in the public space, oppressing various other groups (Fraser, 1990).

Fraser (1990) coined the term “subaltern counterpublics” for those ignored groups who create other publics and aim at opening up the public sphere to more actors, modes of representation, and ideas (also see Squires, 2002). These counterpublics participate within the broader public discourse, but at a disadvantage compared with mainstream participants. Much theorizing on subaltern counterpublics has focused on how distinctions between the public and counterpublics are established and enacted (e.g., Asen, 2000; Foust, Pason, & Rogness, 2017; Fraser, 1990; Shrikant, 2014; Squires, 2002; Warner, 2002). Central to counterpublicity is a claim to exclusion from the hegemonic public sphere, leading these groups to lack the privilege mainstream groups and their respective discourses enjoy (Asen, 2009). Excluded groups become counterpublics when they create alternative narratives that challenge (i.e., are counter to) culturally hegemonic assumptions in the larger public sphere. Counterpublics are dialogic spaces as well, where subaltern voices can prepare their ideas for distribution to the broader public (Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002).

Traditionally, counterpublics have been perceived as historically marginalized groups based on that group's collective identity (e.g., Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Fraser, 1990; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). These groups are facing worse material conditions in society than mainstream groups and are therefore disadvantaged when presuming equality in public discourse. As claims to counterpublicity are accomplished through the discursive positioning of a group (Warner, 2002), "privileged"<sup>2</sup> groups can also construct themselves as a subaltern. Groups can claim marginalization if they believe that their ideas do not resonate within the wider public and thus that their views and identities are not accepted in the public sphere. Some groups may even claim a false marginalization (Duerringer, 2013).

There is a debate on whether groups can rightfully be seen as a counterpublic if their views aim at limiting others' access to the public sphere by excluding people, ideas, or modes of expression. Some studies have stressed a critical approach that reserves the concept of counterpublics for groups aiming to expand the public sphere (e.g., Asen, 2009; Duerringer, 2013). It has been proposed to refer to movements that attempt to delimit access to the public sphere as antipublics (e.g., Cammaerts, 2007; Davis, 2020). In contrast, Fraser (1990) suggested recognizing "anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian" counterpublics (p. 67), a perspective recently taken up theoretically by Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2019), who refer to this as the functionalist perspective. Various studies have taken up this call and classified fascist movements as counterpublics, as they engage and interact similarly to counterpublics (e.g., Xu, 2020).

In this article, we join the functionalist perspective toward the public sphere, as this enables us to empirically investigate how the public sphere, as an ideological construct, is negotiated and challenged by various actors. The functionalist perspective has largely been used to study counterpublicity from a quantitative perspective, particularly using network and content analysis (e.g., Kaiser, 2017; Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Xu, 2020). Still, qualitative analyses supporting this perspective are largely lacking. Therefore, we use discourse analysis, grounded in ethnomethodology (Heritage, 1984), to understand how right-wing groups position themselves vis-à-vis the public sphere, and thus how they claim counterpublicity, to enhance our understanding of the functional perspective.

Hence, in contrast to much qualitative work on the public sphere, we do not take a critical approach. We have no normative claim for what counterpublics should be. In contrast to various discourse analytic studies on (purported) conservative counterpublics, which have analyzed the privilege of their members (Asen, 2009), or their ideological aims (Duerringer, 2013), we are interested in how such groups claim counterpublicity for themselves by differentiating themselves from others and contrasting themselves with the mainstream. We employ the theories on publicity and counterpublicity to understand how politically conservative voices make sense of their own communication and how they accomplish their counterpublic positioning. Based on the above literature review, we determined the discursive relationships to the public sphere a counterpublic has to construct. Specifically, by using various key symbols (Ortner, 1973),

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<sup>2</sup> We use quotation marks here because these groups may be viewed by other groups as privileged, while they may or may not be privileged in a specific instance. We think, for example, of the working-class White men in the U.S., who are usually viewed as privileged because of their gender and race identities, although they may construct themselves as subaltern, and they may, class-based speaking, be oppressed, when compared with the bourgeois.

counterpublics have to accomplish (1) a coherent discourse (2) aimed at changing society, while they are both (3) marginalized and (4) different from the mainstream (also see Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017). We focus on the participants' metaphors, narratives, and interaction (Cho & Lee, 2020), as well as make sense of the visuals surrounding the recorded interactions (Machin & Mayr, 2012) to understand the diverse forms of counterpublics that exist and how "doing being a counterpublic" is accomplished.

Our data come from two distinct conservative discourses to better understand how right-wing groups position themselves as counterpublics. We have two examples of public discourse from the U.S. and South Korea. Our U.S. case is Alex Jones and his show *InfoWars*, where he and his audience share conspiratorial narratives about public events on a conservative talk-radio show. Conspiratorial narratives that, of course, Jones and his audience feel are being ignored or suppressed by mainstream news. The case from South Korea concerns conservative, evangelical Christians, who hold a protest rally, a "flag rally," that positions them as right-wing political activists protesting the widely supported impeachment of their president.

By selecting cases of conservative discourse that are different, moving across politics and religion, and from the U.S. to South Korea, our analysis helps to better understand how such right-wing movements claim counterpublicity. Additionally, by having cases from different countries, this study connects to work on international and transnational movements (e.g., see Foust et al., 2017). This diversity enables us to develop a more comprehensive understanding on the discursive construction of counterpublicity from conservative voices.

### **Counterpublicity and Conspiracy Theories in the U.S.**

Counterpublicity requires an alternative (i.e., counter) narrative to mainstream discourse (Fraser, 1990). In the U.S., one example of a right-wing group that shares such discourses is a group formed around Alex Jones's show *InfoWars*. The counterpublic formed by Jones and his listeners is based in what is called "conspiracism"—meaning, the tendency to view current events as the result of secret collusions of powerful people who abuse their power to maintain their control (Olmsted, 2009). For conspiracy theorists like Jones, the task is to reveal such secretive manifestations of power, and this is what *InfoWars*, a multi-platform show on both radio and the Internet, proclaims to accomplish. As these conspiracy theories run counter to mainstream discourse, this can be used for this group's discursive positioning as a counterpublic, as we show is the case for *InfoWars*.

Jones has been widely criticized as he is a prominent voice on the far U.S. right, especially during the candidacy and subsequent election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Throughout the 2016 presidential elections, Jones articulated on *InfoWars* contrastive positions to the mainstream media and other right-wing political pundits. Thus, the corpus of transcribed recordings of Jones's *InfoWars* show used for this article ranges from February 2016 to October 2017. Since then, Jones has become well-known because of his theories about public tragedies, such as claiming that the Sandy Hook school shooting was

faked, as well as his aggressive personality and bombastic style, all of which have also made him the subject of much ridicule, subsequent infamy, and eventual exclusion from mainstream public discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Key to Jones's show is the use of militaristic language. The show's name, *InfoWars*, is central to the show's framing (and see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, on the metaphor of politics as war). When returning from a break, a sound machine often proclaims: "Defending the Republic from enemies both foreign and domestic, it's Alex Jones." The words here are an allusion to the United States armed forces oath of enlistment that is required for all those who join the U.S. military. Specifically, this presumes a battle between some citizens of the U.S. and enemies that are both outside and within the country. Hence, an opposition is claimed between the show and its audience, and others in the U.S. public. Additionally, it suggests that to defend oneself one ought to listen to the show, learn the discourse to oppose other discourses and act against the followers of these discourses.

References to war and militaristic metaphors shape the show's entire discourse. When opening his show, Jones sounds like a general calling on his troops to rally to the battlefield.

***Excerpt 1. Announcement Clip (October 26, 2016).***

1. Announcer: [music intro] You're listening to the Alex
2. Jones show. [music continues] The world is a dangerous
3. place, not because of evil, but because of those who look
4. on and do nothing. If you are receiving this transmission
5. Jones: YOU ARE!
6. Announcer: You are the resistance.
7. Jones: YOU ARE THE RESISTANCE!
8. Announcer: We now take you live to the central Texas
9. command center. It's Alex Jones.

The excerpt illustrates how Jones addresses his listeners and mobilizes them for his cause. He claims that there are many people who "look on and do nothing" (1:3-4), and thus implies that people should step up and act to improve the world. Like other counterpublics, the counterpublic on *InfoWars* sees itself as a moral agent fighting against injustice. Jones provides "Resistance" (1:6-7) as a key metaphor for the audience's identity. By receiving "this transmission" (1:4) people listening to his show "are the resistance" (1:6), led by commander Jones, in his "central Texas command center" (1:8-9). Thus, Jones calls on his audience to challenge the hegemonic mainstream discourse. Seeing oneself as "resistance" is central to positioning oneself as a counterpublic, as it implies that one is marginalized. This discourse mirrors other marginal groups who use "resistance" as an organizing vehicle for their counterpublicity (e.g., Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). In this segment, and throughout his show, Jones and his followers presume they are engaged in an "information war" where they are trying to fight back against the mainstream narratives.

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<sup>3</sup> Our data were collected before Jones was "deplatformed" from YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which are taken as the current Public Sphere (e.g., Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). This exclusion enhances his claim for counterpublicity, a point we will pursue in future research.

An important component of the counterpublic sphere created by *InfoWars* are call-in interactions between audience members and Alex Jones. These interactions allow the callers to share their alternative information to the mainstream discourse and propose political action. Host–caller interactions also enable Jones to verify and evaluate the audience’s opinions. In this way, among the listeners to the show, ideas are aligned, before they are disseminated to other listeners and U.S. society at large. Having a separate, secluded arena for discussion of ideas, Jones and his audience form a separate public from the mainstream.

Many of the discussion among Jones and his audience use conspiracism, the tendency to interpret events as the result of actions perpetrated by powerful yet hidden actors (see Olmsted, 2009). On *InfoWars*, the callers and Jones form a critical, and ultimately shared, evaluation of the activities of government entities that is based on extreme skepticism toward them. While the callers bring in narratives that criticize political institutions, Jones orchestrates alignment of the community within a single overarching narrative. Excerpt 2 illustrates how the *InfoWars* community uses conspiracy theories. Here, a caller raises a conspiracy concerning the Center for Disease Control (CDC). As Jones and the caller co-construct this conspiracy, they also coordinatively enact being a counterpublic.

***Excerpt 2. Interaction: Alex Jones and Sharon (March 29, 2017).***

1. Sharon: I just received a letter, saying they would be
2.       calling, about this, uh, study they would be doing,
3.       I was apparently chosen by random.
4. Jones: hahaha [laughs incredulously]
5. Sharon: And it says they were interested in the names of
6.       your children that were between the ages of 17 and
7.       37 months, or children, teenagers 13 to 17
8.       years, now, the middle school . . .
9. Jones: Sure, you’re being targeted, no one should talk to
10.      these people, but so, so, so what’s the main report?
11. Sharon: Well, the main thing is, is, I just feel like
12.      this is a big phishing expedition, and I don’t have any
13.      children school-aged, I do have grandchildren, and . . .
14. Jones: No, well they’re bombing everybody with this, and
15.      then once they get you on the phone then they harass
16.      you, then they try to like claim it’s neglect, then they
17.      try to send CPS to your house, don’t answer the phone
18.      when the CDC calls, they’re there to give you diseases,
19.      they’re there to hurt you and your family, that’s their
20.      admitted goal.

Sharon shares her distrust about the effectiveness and sincerity of vaccinations and immunization programs and of federal government agencies in general, all of which Jones and his community also assume are harmful (2:14–20). Sharon begins her narrative with lamenting that she was “apparently chosen by random” (2:3). She implies she does not believe she was chosen by random as “apparently” decreases her



epistemic belief in the randomness. Jones recognizes this disbelief and shares her sentiment, laughing in response (2:4), seeing the randomness as a joke, and after Sharon specifies what the CDC wants to know, he affirms that she is "being targeted" (2:9), strengthening Sharon's earlier skeptical remark. Next, Sharon further strengthens this suspicion of the CDC by calling it a "phishing expedition" (2:12), which is followed up by Jones arguing that the CDC is "bombing everybody with this" (2:14) and keeps harassing everyone (2:15-16) such that ultimately, they can "hurt you and your family" (2:19). While Sharon starts her contribution simply expressing some suspicion, Jones stresses extreme negativism about the CDC, to the point where he hijacks Sharon's narrative to push it toward the most extreme position: The CDC is part of the conspiracy to harm the American people.

Excerpt 2 shows how Jones orchestrates a coherent discourse for his listenership. Jones and Sharon share their distrust of government, but next Jones focuses on an element in her story determining how her contribution will be shaped. By then further building on each other's contributions, Sharon and Jones coconstruct a conspiracy perpetrated by the CDC (i.e., an attempt by a government agency to gather information about citizens' health, and lives, under false pretext to harm them). During the interaction, while Sharon and Jones align their positions, Jones orchestrates a particular interpretation of the story. In the end, they share the hyper-skepticism, assuming nefarious intent on behalf of the federal government. By directing the narrative to this central presumed conspiracy, Jones positions himself and his audience as a counterpublic. Jones provides his community with a coherent discourse, wherein they are marginalized by a government conspiracy.

This is not the only method employed by Jones and his public. Another key element in their positioning as a counterpublic is raising suppressed (mis/dis/mal<sup>4</sup>) information. The story raised in the next excerpt (3) is grounded in the assumption that left-wing agents are central to the government conspiracy, and that the mainstream media works hard to protect them. Here, Alan raises information about then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, presumed by Jones and his community as a key agent of the current world order against which they fight, and suggests that this story has been silenced by the media.

***Excerpt 3. Interaction: Alex Jones and Alan (October 20, 2016).***

1. Alan: A very dangerous Clinton cash operation has been uncovered
2. in Florida, a company, Gulftainer, has leased the container
3. cargo terminal at Port Canaveral, there's a submarine base
4. there, it's next to Kennedy Space Center, and the company is
5. run by the brother of Doctor Jafar, Al Jafar [Dr. Jafar Dhia
6. Jafar], who was Saddam Hussein's chief nuclear physicist who
7. headed the entire WMD program for Saddam, this could cost
8. Hillary the election in Florida.
9. Jones: Ok, is this in the news? 'cause I haven't heard of this.
10. Alan: It is not. It is being blacklisted. They're trying to bury

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<sup>4</sup> As we discussed above, we are not interpreting their practices, and avoid adjudicating the type of information they disperse.

11. this story.
12. Jones: Well, you know, normally I would roll my eyes at this, but
13. I'm gonna look into it.

Like in this case, callers routinely call Jones to alert him to stories that, they believe, are being ignored in the mainstream media. Here, Alan reports a financial connection between Clinton and a former scientist for the Saddam Hussein regime, which he presents as very important information ("very dangerous," 3:1 and "this could cost . . .," 3:7-8), but ignored by mainstream sources ("blacklisted," 3:10). The story fits *InfoWars'* narrative of the involvement of the left conspiring within the government against people like the listeners of the show. The claim here is that this information is kept out of the public sphere by people like Clinton and the media. Alan feels he needs to fight against the media to get these stories out.

Although Jones shows some reluctance in believing Alan, he promises to "look into it" (3:13). Jones then latches on to the "nuclear physicist" part in Alan's story to describe an attempted, unauthorized removal of thermonuclear weapons from a U.S. military base in West Texas (not shown here). The unifying elements of this discourse is that people are silenced by the media and people cannot just get the truth out. Jones provides a platform for sharing such information. Jones and Alan share a focus on suppressed information as a presumed part of the conspiracy. These are conspiracy stories that create a shared community of people whose stories are silenced and need to fight against the political order, the Left, and the Media to get their opinions and positions heard.

The conspiracy theories on *InfoWars* seek to reveal secretive actions led by liberal elites, who target people to ensure the current world order is recreated. Jones calls on his audience to resist the dominant narratives and partake in an information war. Through the call-in interactions, Jones coconstructs with his callers the presumed conspiracy that the government targets and silences people. Jones orchestrates this coherence across the varied contributions. Through this conspiracy narrative, Jones and his audience can position themselves as marginalized by the authorities. Additionally, through their conspiracy theories, they differentiate themselves from other right-wing movements, which are often criticized on the show, for just "look[ing] on and do[ing] nothing" (1:3-4). This moralistic language and adversarial positioning to perceived hegemonic forces are the modus operandi of *InfoWars*. The conspiracy-minded alternative narratives give Jones, his callers, and listeners a mechanism to claim being a counterpublic.

### **Counterpublicity and Christianity in South Korea**

Between late 2016 and early 2017, South Korean society was mired in a corruption scandal involving its political and business elites, which ultimately led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. Until the Constitutional Court finalized Park's impeachment in March 2017, millions of disappointed Korean citizens took to the streets with candles in hand and called for her impeachment over 20 consecutive weeks, events known as the candlelight rallies. Though the majority of Korean people (almost 80%) supported the impeachment, Park's fervent supporters argued the attack on Park was a political accusation based on rumors and unproven allegations (Ha, 2017). These supporters organized pro-Park counterrallies near the candlelight rallies. The participants of the pro-Park rallies upheld a right-wing agenda signified by the flags they chose to bring. They waved the Korean flag, the *Taegeukgi*, to invoke their patriotism, and

the U.S. flag to show their support for the Korean–U.S. alliance, appreciating the U.S.’s support of South Korea during and after the Korean War (Ock, 2017). Both flags also signified hostility toward the North Korean regime. In their eyes, the candlelight rallies were led by liberal “North Korea sympathizers” who did not appreciate South Korea’s miraculous development after the Korean War, and who wish to build an amicable relationship with communists in North Korea (Ha, 2017).

Within the pro-Park rallies, however, a group of people carried a third flag, the Israeli flag, which is the focus of this section. This phenomenon drew a great deal of attention from the media because it was not seen at previous rallies. This conservative Christian group waved this flag to uphold their religious agenda: “Saving our country by praying,” an allusion to what was done by ancient Israelites in the Bible (e.g., Yi, 2017).

The history of Christianity in Korea dates to at least the 18th century and is central to understanding this group. Protestantism has a significant cultural influence in the country and is infused with Korean nationalism (Ryu, 2004). In the early 20th century, Korean religious leaders resisted the Japanese annexation of Korea, culminating in the 1919 March 1st Movement that produced a declaration of independence from Japan. This declaration was signed by 33 religious leaders, 15 of whom were Christian (Ryu, 2004). The hanging of Christian resisters and the burning of churches cemented the idea that Christianity was an active force for independence (Grayson, 2002, p. 161). This historical link between the Church and Korean nationalism gives Korean Protestant Christianity a conservative character with an interest in political activism. From the outset of the right-wing movement in early 2000s, South Korean Protestant Christianity has played an active role in Korean politics (Cho & Lee, 2020). Especially, the Christian Council of Korea, the largest interdenominational Protestant church coalition, opposed the progressive bills proposed by liberal governments and supported various far-right movements (Ryu, 2004).

Just like the conservative conspiracy theorists on *InfoWars*, the South Korean evangelical group that carried the Israeli flag claimed marginalization and positioned themselves as a counterpublic. Using logic from the Bible, they justified their far-right agenda, and how they are turned into victims, silenced, and oppressed in a society dominated by liberals and secular values. The pro-Park group produced videos of events that took place on January 7, 2017. The first 20-minutes-long clip is a recording of the group’s public prayer meeting, called Mizpah Prayer meeting, held in Seoul Plaza (“Mizpah Prayer”), just before joining the pro-Park rally that happened nearby. The second 26-minutes-long clip is a recording of their marching with flags to join the pro-Park rally (“march”).<sup>5</sup> We employed multimodal analysis of the video, examining its images, the written captions, and its spoken words (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Because the group self-produced and disseminated these videos for political purposes, the captions provide their own interpretation of the messages preached in the videos.

Like *InfoWars*, this group separates itself from the mainstream public sphere to align their positions. Throughout the video, participants described themselves as different from other supporters through their spoken words, captions, and the hand-held signs, evoking a separation of us from them

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPBRRpJoL3Q> (Part 1–Public prayer);  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83yqN\\_jU6UI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83yqN_jU6UI) (Part 2–Marching with flags)

(Wodak, 1996). In the opening of the prayer meeting, Pastor Oh, an organizer of the rally, quoted Bible verses (2 Chronicles, 7:14), invoking religious metaphors, to accomplish this.

**Excerpt 4. Pastor Oh (Mizpah Prayer, 0:15).**

1. Pastor: If my people, who are called by my name, will
2.       humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from
3.       their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive
4.       their sins and heal their land.
5.       Lord, we confess, forgive us, forgive us, forgive our
6.       arrogance. . . . We have lost them!
- [While this talk is heard, a caption appears]
7.       Caption: God, clean the city of Seoul, the city of sin, the city
8.       of sexual immorality, the city of homosexuality. . . . Don't sweep
9.       away this land with the wicked. . . . Have pity on this land.

Pastor Oh uses "them" to reference people who support the impeachment (4:6). They are implicitly demonized, as the pastor claims that "we have lost them" (4:6) and that they have "their wicked ways" (4:3). Pastor Oh asks for forgiveness in his prayer (4:5), not for his own sins, but for the sins of the participants of the candlelight rallies, who are, as the captions clarify, the "wicked" (4.9) who made Seoul "the city of sin" (4:7). Pastor Oh compares the political situation in Seoul with the biblical city of Sodom, where the wicked people led to God's destruction of the city. God was willing to spare Sodom for the sake of a small number of righteous people, if those were found. The attendees believe that their confessions and prayers can save the city of Seoul and the entire nation, and thus they compare themselves with the few righteous people (that were not found) in Sodom.

Through comparing Seoul with the biblical Sodom, Pastor Oh constructs a counterpublic. He describes the Korean public sphere as one of the "wicked," which endorses sin like "sexual immorality" and "homosexuality" (4:7-9). Being the righteous people and explicating that they have "lost them," the attendees of the prayer meeting position themselves outside the mainstream public sphere. Additionally, the story of Sodom also implies that the righteous people have been pushed out of and marginalized within the public sphere. Namely, if the small group of righteous people had existed in Sodom, they would have been marginalized and ignored within that society. Pastor Oh also claims that he wants to improve the Korean public sphere by offering an opportunity for the "wicked" to change their ways and adopt the evangelical counter-narrative: People should "seek my face and turn from their wicked ways" (4:2-3).

Though they once held culturally hegemonic influence, the evangelical Christians position themselves now as a counterpublic. They understand their change of status from being leaders to being an oppositional group, and Pastor Oh even acknowledges some of the shortcomings of their previous hegemony. After reading the verse from the Bible, he refers to their own "arrogance" (4:6) and claims that they "have lost them" (4:6), thereby taking (some) responsibility for the currently "wicked" public sphere. Here, Pastor Oh claims the status of a "fallen-from-grace" counterpublic: they once constituted the public, but now they are a counterpublic who needs to fight against mainstream ideology.

The story of Sodom was used in “doing being a counterpublic” because these people believe in the Bible as a source of authority. Projecting piety, through quoting the Bible, is their central strategy. The group also uses other biblical stories to create their counterpublic identity, as did Pastor Kim, another organizer of the prayer meeting.

***Excerpt 5. Pastor Kim (Mizpah Prayer, 8:45, 12:00).***

1. Pastor: We need to identify ourselves with our nation, we are one
2. and the same. Daniel embraced his nation’s sins and confessed
3. as if they are his own sins. President Park is on the verge
4. of impeachment because we did not pray for the administration.
5. Forgive us. This is the Korean Church’s fault. This is our
6. sin. This is the nation’s fault. . . . God forgive us.

In the Old Testament, Daniel (5:2) prays to God to liberate the Jews from Babylon after 70 years of exile. Pastor Kim refers to Daniel to express that, like him, the meeting attendees are a few people who are praying for the sins of the entire nation. He then continues to use biblical and religious notions. He speaks of the Devil who damaged the nation (not shown here), and he calls on angels and the Lord to save the government. Most importantly, like Daniel, they take on the sins of the nation as if they are their own. Pastor Kim explains that they are responsible for not doing enough (5:4-5). Like in the previous excerpt (4), in this discourse, the participants construct themselves as a “fallen-from-grace” counterpublic, as they presume the Korean Church has lost its authority in a society where they are not welcomed anymore.

In the second video clip, the marchers see themselves as continuing Jesus’s role. Though the people in the rally march and sing religious hymns, some passing cars honk at the demonstrators as a sign of disapproval, and the marchers yell at them in response. Besides illustrating that the marchers are rejected by the mainstream public, the movement uses this as an opportunity to further their message. When such conflicts occur, the video mutes the live sound from the event and inserts sad and slow music about Jesus’s sacrifice and love for sinners. This editing explicates the group’s position: Like Jesus was marginalized and persecuted but right, they are marginalized (not persecuted, though) and right, too. Similarly, like Jesus, they hold the morally righteous positions, and even though they are the minority and rejected by the masses, they will save everyone.

The Christian group was an integral part of the pro-Park rallies, but they also worked to differentiate themselves from others. This was expressed during the rally by carrying a unique flag, the Israeli flag (see Figure 1). When the large Korean flag was followed by a same-sized Israeli flag, Pastor Oh shouted, “Hail Israel! Hail the God of Israel! Hail our God!” (0:20). Finally, when protestors carried the U.S. flag, Pastor Oh yelled: “America is our ally! America is our friend! Protect us, America!” (1:50).



**Figure 1. The three flags of the prayer meeting (Caption: "Now the leading group of flags is marching ahead," "March," 2:20).**

On the one hand, the symbolism of the flags connects the Christian group to their fellow protesters: The Korean flag shows that the group is patriotic and politically conservative. The appearance of the U.S. flag and Pastor Oh's shouting shows approval of the U.S.'s helping South Korea. This highlighted that the prayer meeting's agenda was aligned with the other political movements at the rally. On the other hand, their flag symbolism also set them apart. The Israeli flag and the language associated with it stressed the participants' religious identity. As their protest phrase said, the Korean and U.S. flags represent the people's will, and the Israeli flag represents God's will. The prayer meeting chose an equivalent national flag that best represented its group religious identity to match with the two other national flags, meaning that the group only wanted to add another identity without losing the other.

By adding the Israeli flag to the other flags, the group showed how its actions were in line with God's will. Just as the genre of conspiracy theory does for *InfoWars*, the symbolic combination of the three flags made this Korean evangelical rally unique among right-wing groups, showing that ideologically akin to other rally participants, but not entirely like them (Cho & Lee, 2020). Their counterpublic frame was not shared by all attendees of this rally; just their Christian group within this larger rally.

The Christian group used religious language, narratives, and the Israeli flag to create a distinct identity and uphold its political agenda. The identity is unique in both respects: It is different from the majority, the liberals, but also from the other right-wing movements that the group was marching with. The

language and symbols, especially the combination of flags and the use of the Israel flag, are used to create the subaltern group of Christians, who fight against the public to improve public life.

### Discussion

These two analyses show how two movements self-categorize as counterpublic. Alex Jones and his community use conspiracism as a key symbol (Ortner, 1973) to self-categorize as counterpublic. Using *InfoWars* as a platform, the audience listens to Jones's "transmission" and shares their own conspiracy theories. Above we can see Sharon and Alan, for example, moderated by Alex Jones, form a morally coherent, shared narrative about the actions of secretive, malevolent elites. Through this, they attempt to change mainstream discourse, as they "defend the Republic" by stop "look[ing] on" and start resisting through an information war. Alex Jones and his audience claim marginality by suggesting they are fighting the Federal Government, the mainstream media, and powerful actors, who target them in "phishing expeditions," or corrupt politicians, like Hilary Clinton (a common right-wing target for righteous indignation), who make deals with the enemy nations to increase their power. On *InfoWars*, marginality is also implied through using the metaphors of warfare, of a battle between good and evil. Infowars distinguishes itself from other actors, including groups on the right, as they present themselves as enlightened, while mainstream others simply "look on" and do nothing to the evil actions of the powerful. This implication of a battle between the forces of good and evil implies the morally justified position of the marginalized.

In South Korea, the evangelical Christians at the pro-Park rally position themselves as counterpublic using the moral language of religion. They create coherence through organizing secluded meetings where through their preaching, the pastors provide the group an interpretation of the Bible and a societal role. The group attempts to change the public sphere by trying to stop the wicked ways of the "City of Sin." They do this through praying and confessing to God; they sacrifice for and still love the sinners. They actively try to bring back their evangelical moral values and beliefs. The South Korean evangelical Christians characterize themselves as outcasts. Through the stories, they always position themselves as the minority, who, in contrast to the rest of society, can uphold the standards asked for by God, even when facing the Devil. This difference from the mainstream is most clearly visible during the March, where they add another flag to stress their religious conviction. We have summarized our findings on Jones and the South Korean prayer meeting in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparison of the Structural Claims of Counterpublicity in Our Data.**

|                             | Alex Jones   | Prayer meeting  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Key symbols                 | Conspiracy (of the left)<br>Resistance (to the left)   | Christianity<br>Israeli flag  |
| Coherence mechanism         | Listening to and sharing conspiracy narratives, as moderated by Alex Jones.  | Listening to and sharing religious talk, as preached by religious leaders.  |
| Reforming the public sphere | Fighting for the Republic by resisting through partaking in an information war against the left, mainstream media and the federal government by inserting new information. | Praying and confessing to God to spare Seoul, while still loving the sinners. Bringing back their Christian moral values and beliefs against the stream of liberalism to save the nation. |
| Being marginalized          | The federal government and media target them and keep them in the dark to keep them silent.  | Being silenced and opposed by the (liberal) majority, with whom the Devil sides to undo God's will.   |

We deviated from other qualitative studies on the public sphere by taking not a critical approach but a functional one, whereby we consider right-wing movements as what they themselves claim to be, which, as far as we theorize, is being a counterpublic. Through the qualitative analysis, we can further support Kaiser and Rauchfleisch's (2019) proposed functionalist perspective to studying the public sphere. In general, a functionalist approach accounts better for the empirical data observed.

This perspective has benefits over a critical perspective in four ways. First, a functionalist perspective recognizes the right-wing movements' activism in their own terms. Like other marginalized groups, the right-wing case studies similarly position themselves vis-à-vis the public sphere as marginalized, morally justified agents. They both lay claims to being silenced or ignored in public by a powerful actor, but they also try to challenge and improve public discourse. From their perspective, their ideal public sphere is more ethical and venerable than the current one. The community around Alex Jones "defends the Republic" and shares information they feel is suppressed or ignored. The South Korean evangelical Christians "pray" and "confess" and still love the "sinners," to try to get their fellow citizens to realize that God's message will result in a better life. The participants in our data categorize themselves not as members of an antipublic (Cammaerts, 2007; Davis, 2020), but, as we argue, counterpublic. They claim that there is violence inherent to the system.

Second, a functionalist perspective recognizes Habermas's (1962/1991) warning of "*the fiction of the one public*" (p. 56, emphasis in original). In his historical-sociological account, the bourgeois public sphere became the focus of attention because it ultimately dominated the other publics by (falsely) presenting itself as the only public sphere (p. xviii). Exclusion was thus a central part of Habermas's (1962/1991) original conception of the Bourgeois public sphere. As any public sphere will have unique constraints on participation and a different distribution of control, which determine its ultimately mediated output and input into policymaking (Dahlgren, 2005), any instantiation of it—including the most inclusive one—will create exclusions and unequal access. Antidemocratic ideals are necessarily excluded within an egalitarian and democratic public



sphere. Therefore, we stress that an all-inclusive public sphere is a contradiction in terms. The ideal of an all-inclusive public sphere ignores the fundamental premise of the public sphere concept: It fundamentally is exclusionary and ideological (i.e., meant to put specific interests and groups ahead). Whether these exclusions are desirable is a political rather than an analytic question, from an ethnomethodological perspective.

Third, through a functionalist approach, it is better possible to study the public sphere as “the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination” (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). In our data, we saw that the participants are actively excluded, silenced, and ignored by ordinary citizens, who are a member of a public grounded in an (moving toward) egalitarian and democratic ideology. Democratic discourse can be hegemonic and be met by counterhegemonic discourses. Following Gramsci (see Jackson Lears’ 1985 discussion of Gramsci), the public sphere is the institution through which consent is managed to favor the status quo by building and maintaining ideological boundaries that determine the nature of acceptable debate and common-sense thinking of ordinary people. The study of the public sphere is a study of hegemony, and in this regard a conception of counterpublicity should remain neutral of ideology itself. We should not study how institutions create hegemony through concepts informed by an ideological discourse.

Fourth, by approaching counterpublicity functionally, we can acknowledge the multiplicity of challenges a public sphere experiences through many diverse forms of activist citizenship (Isin, 2009). A public sphere is not based on a linear back-and-forth between democratic and antidemocratic ideals, but negotiated by a multiplicity of projects of various groups of activist citizens. Alex Jones and the evangelical Christians do not aim at reducing inclusivity of the public sphere. They fight completely different hegemonic antagonists—a left-wing conspiracy and the Devil, respectively. The public sphere is an ever-evolving institution (Habermas, 1962/1991; Warner, 2002), and the center of the public sphere and its counterpublics are continuously being negotiated by different activist groups through discursive processes, based on communication, language, and visuals. Moreover, as both groups studied in this article have been part of a public sphere, which was more amenable to their interests, this shows that ideological attachments and assumptions of the public sphere change, based on actors’ continuous negotiation of publicity and counterpublicity. This was most explicitly seen in our South Korean data, where the Christian<sup>6</sup> participants positioned themselves as a “fallen-from-grace” counterpublic (also see Davis, 2020).

### Conclusion

We took an ethnomethodological approach (e.g., Heritage, 1984) to study how right-wing groups claim counterpublicity as a politics of disruption by articulating their sense-making processes on their communication vis-à-vis the public sphere. Specifically, we elucidated how right-wing movements accomplish “doing being a counterpublic.” Though our two cases were different regarding the key symbols they used, in both instances these groups coordinate their message, and aim at improving their society, while they and their message are rejected by the mainstream. Next, we used this analysis to support Kaiser

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<sup>6</sup> We do not discuss this here, but the role of Christianity in the U.S. can be an interesting case for studying how the public sphere is an ever-evolving construct to learn how it is being negotiated by multiple actors at the same time.

and Rauchfleisch's (2019) proposal to adopt a functionalist perspective toward the public sphere to supplement previous quantitative work that has been done within this approach. In four ways, our qualitative approach supports taking a functionalist perspective. First, in this way, we recognize that the movements we studied see themselves as venerable and not as antipublics. Second, this embraces the fact that an all-inclusive public sphere is a contradiction in terms. Third, we also acknowledge the fact that even a venerable, inclusive public sphere manufactures a hegemonic discourse adopted by ordinary citizens. Fourth, we are not blindsided by a single axis of power struggles over the nature of the public sphere.

All in all, to study the public sphere, we believe that a functionalist approach is beneficial to enhance our understanding of the struggles for power. An ideologically disinterested interpretation of the concept of counterpublicity (i.e., as a status claimed by the speakers themselves) helps to explain the negotiation of the boundaries of public debate by a multiplicity of activist citizens. Future studies, employing the concept of counterpublicity, could elucidate the different politics of disruption in democratic societies. Doing this would enable describing and analyzing agonistic and antagonistic practices in those societies (e.g., Mouffe, 2013).

Though Duerringer's (2013) and Asen's (2009) analyses have moral and critical benefits, it limits our theoretical conception counterpublics to viewing them as intrinsically embedded with normative principles that are the venerable, liberal values for diversity and inclusion.<sup>7</sup> In this research, we have shown that organizing a movement as counterpublic is achieved regardless of what and who the group is and its members are, since the notion of counterpublic allows for the creation of a coherent subaltern group that should fight for social change against stronger powers than itself including the government. The logic of counterpublicity to negotiate the public sphere is available to any activist citizen. Therefore, we conclude that ethnomethodological discourse analysis yields beneficial insights to this field of inquiry. The power of communication as a discipline is to look beyond the materiality into empirical public claims, to show that society is more than its material construction: society is based on the way its members communicate who and what they are in relation to others, and indeed the two groups we study position themselves as oppressed and oppositional—as counterpublic.

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<sup>7</sup> Specifically, we follow Carbaugh's (2007) proposal in this regard. Rather than abandoning critical research, we believe this should occur at a later stage of research. Research goes through four stages: a descriptive, an interpretative, a comparative and, lastly, a critical stage.

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