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Hardcore Subcultures for Law-Abiding Citizens and Online Nationalism: Case Study on the Korean Internet Community *ILBE Jeojangso*

Kyujin Shim

**Introduction**

Nationalism is resurgent in East Asia. As tensions intensify in the region, relations among Korea, China and Japan have chilled to seldom-preceded levels. How ironic, given that Internet technology and the World Wide Web facilitate globalization and intercultural connections and have the potential to make our planet a brightly imagined One World. But in that very potential, of course, lies the hard fact that the Internet is simultaneously a “base camp” for crusades of extreme nationalism.

The phenomenon of extreme nationalism is not atypical in Japanese society, and *Netto-uyo* (net right-wingism) is one of its most representative cases of online grassroots nationalism, increasingly making its presence felt and its voice heard via the Internet, YouTube, Internet bulletin boards, chat rooms, other social media, and increasingly popular forms of comic-art discourse (manga etc.). On such platforms, *Netto-uyo* is a combative voice on many international issues, including the military sexual-slavery (the so-called comfort women) quarrel with Korea, the territorial conflict with Korea over the islands Tsushima and Takeshima (known to Koreans as Daemado and Dokdo respectively), the dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands (known to the Chinese as Diaoyu), and the conflict with Korea regarding the dislike a number of Japanese have for Koreans (including North Koreans) resident in Japan and having special rights (McCormack, 2011). Initially the latter polemic was presented as comic-book agitprop on the Web, then as the hardcover best-selling manga
Kenkanryu – Hating the Korean Wave, and finally going onto the Web generally in all its forms. Kenkanryu has extended into a series with follow-up handbooks, continuing volumes, etc. In its characters’ speech bubbles, wording typically includes references to Takeshima, Tsushima, and so on, and angry disclaimers such as (in translation): “There never was any forced removal of Koreans!!”

Netto-uyo not only remains as a virtual community, i.e., in cyberspace, but has also taken to the streets as a grassroots activist organization, Zaitokukai (Citizens’ Group against Special Rights for Korean Residents in Japan), initially organized by 100 netizens under the slogan (in translation) “Let’s proactively organize by visible and effective actions!” By early 2012, Zaitokukai had become the largest conservative right-wing group in Japan, with more than 11,000 activists (Chung, 2013; Sakamoto, 2011).

In Korea, a conservative online community known as ILBE Jeojangso (hereinafter ILBE) is in many ways a comparable counterpart to Japan’s Netto-uyo. ILBE’s two fundamentals are ultra-conservatism (i.e., what many regard as extreme right-wingism) and commitment to absolute freedom of speech. This mix manifests itself as vigorous advocacy of its right-wing views. Initially it began as a humour-site, quickly gained wide attention, and in 2014, established a new record by exceeding the 20,000 mark for simultaneous log-ins (the number is assumed to be more for mobile users), and a total membership exceeding 100,000 (Kim, 2014). ILBE has become a significant social concern to which most Korean mainstream media devote high interest, and much attention, printed media space, and broadcast media air-time.

In general, the Internet is perceived as a liberal space in terms of major user demographics and political orientation, and Korea’s cyberspace leans toward liberals and left-wing groups (Peak, 2013). So, interesting questions arise regarding ILBE and its popularity: In a liberal-dominant cyberspace, what drives conservative netizens to the ILBE community,
armed with strong racism and nationalism? What are the differences and commonalities between the ILBE community and Japanese Netto-uyo? In the chronology of Korean online communities, sporadically, netizens possessing conservative and racist traits have attempted to build conservative online communities but these have been limited, and none has evolved into an influential community on a par with ILBE (Peak, 2013). This leads to our next question: What leads to ILBE’s great success and the popularity of its site, in contrast to the humble beginnings of its conservative predecessors which ended in failure? In addressing the question, this study explored the characteristics of the ILBE community as neo-right online activists. Also, to examine the difference between ILBE and traditional nationalism in South Korea, the study delved into the historical context of society’s political and regional conflicts. Further study looked at the generation gap between Generation X (in the Korean context, the 386 Generation) and millennials (the young population, now in their 20s and 30s) to understand ILBE as a form of online subculture for the young generation.

**Characteristics of ILBE**

**What is ILBE?**

ILBE is an ultra-conservative online humour-site that split from DC Inside (디시인사이드), a major online community (Kim, 2014). ILBE radically increased its user numbers during the 2012 presidential election (Chung, 2012; Peak, 2013). According to the online data archive Rankey, as of October 2013, ILBE’s daily visitor average was 103,640 on PCs, and 217,453 on mobiles (Huh, 2013). Due to ILBE’s policy of anonymity, which it stresses more heavily than does any other Korean website, it is extremely difficult to identify the age, education level, gender, or social class of its users. However, an assumption from its contents is that the age spectrum of ILBE’s users comprises mainly late teens to early twenties yet includes those in their 40s (Choi, 2013). ILBE reveals strong aversion toward
Korean females, foreign immigrant workers, the political and social left, and residents of Jeolla-do (known to be the most liberal region in Korea), and refers to them in extremely violent, sarcastic, outspoken, and insulting ways. For example, they mocked the coffin of the victim of the 5.18 Gwangju Democratization Movement by referring to it as a “skate parcel (홍어)”. Also, they derided victims of the 2014 Sewol ferry tragedy as odeng (오뎅 or 어묵), meaning fish-cake (Cheon, 2014). On the other hand, they extol as national heroes ex-presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, who are commonly evaluated as dictators.

ILBE is evoking more and more political and social controversy (Huh, 2013).

ILBE is causing serious political and social controversy in Korean society. Leftist netizens, especially, are reacting almost hysterically or neurotically. For example, celebrities who carelessly or inadvertently used ILBE language were almost ostracized, and virtually witch-hunted, by leftist netizens despite their explanations that it was an inadvertent use of language and that they were not ILBE users. The cycle of (i) accusing celebrities irrelevant to the political arena of having a “ILBE tendency,” (ii) teenagers who witness such accusations online joining the ideological disputes, (iii) blindly defining the opponent as a “wingnut” or “moonbat” without clear conceptualization of the conservative or the progressive, and (iv) attacking the opponent via cursing or violence, is being repeated (Yoo, 2013). In brief, ILBE’s emergence is a catalyst that sharpens the conflict in Korean society between left and right and between conservative and liberal.

Is ILBE a Nationalist Community?

Nationalism has various meanings depending on time and place. In particular, the terms *ethnicism* and *nationalism* tend to be used without clear distinction in Korea. Before the 1980s, the age of democratization, nationalism was a concept mainly favoured by the left/liberal camp. For example, the Korean student activists camp in the 1980s was largely...
divided between the Proletarian Democracy (PD) group, emphasizing class equality, and the National Liberation (NL) group, emphasizing liberation and autonomy. The NL group’s argument for freedom from imperialist American oppression emphasized “ethnic homogeneity” with North Korea.

Currently, however, in a dramatic change in the understanding of nationalism, the term is used by the right/conservative camp. It is closely connected to the downfall of the pro-North party that had been emphasizing “national independence”. Given the worldwide phenomenon of ultra-rightists armed with racism – e.g., Japanese Netto-uyo, French Front National, Russian skinheads, German neo-Nazis, etc. – nationalism has become (and has remained) commonly associated with ultra-rightism and ultra-conservatism.

Netto-uyo has typical nationalist sentiments. As a result of the long-term economic depression that traces back to the early 1990s, the economically excluded class vented their complaints on the Korean-Japanese. And among the post-war generation, as they witnessed the economic growth of nations once colonized by Japan, the perception grew and took hold that Japan is no longer the war assailant. This concept of nationalism distinguishes itself from both the former right wing and left wing (Kim, 2012).

Although ILBE is often perceived as the Korean version of Netto-uyo, it is hard to affirm that it is a nationalist website. In contrast to Netto-uyo, which displays strong ethnic superiority to, and revulsion of, other races, Korean ILBE users’ hatred is targeted mainly at the internal Korean society, including females, homosexuals, liberals, Jeolla-do residents and the pro-North (Kim, 2014). And although it has a racist sentiment toward immigrant workers, this particular aspect remains as merely their secondary concern. The inference is thus that ILBE expresses the most negative form of nationalist inclination in attacking the social minority or political correctness. Another perspective is that this simply demonstrates their nationalism to be sufficiently pliable and adhesive enough to be able to attach itself to
anything; in this perspective, their nationalism is unpredictable, a so-called *loose cannon*, and thus hard to manage.

**Keys to Success**

**Retroaction.** How did ILBE, whose major users are males in their twenties (Kim, 2014), come to have rightist/conservative/nationalist sentiments, and prosper, based on such attitudes? The answer is in the keyword: *retroaction*. And it is not merely coincidental that ILBE’s values and direction directly oppose the political correctness of the liberal/left/minority who dominate Korean cyberspace.

Internet usage of Korean netizens occurs at portal sites and community sites (see Figure 1), around which netizens sharing common interests, such as sports, games, cooking or childrearing, assemble (Cheon, 2014). Here the activity is not only discourse on specific interests, but also political and social debates, and these sites are strong reference points for netizens. However, such community sites have highly exclusive dispositions. Those with tendencies different from those of the leading group are often excluded and eventually expelled. For example, if one uploads a satire picture describing the rightist president Lee Myung-bak as a mouse, one will be praised. However, if one posts a picture describing the leftist president Roh Moo-hyun as a koala, one will be criticized heavily for insulting the dead (Peak, 2013). Thus, minority users whose ideas differ from those of the dominant group online tend to wander elsewhere, and many gravitate to, and assemble at, ILBE.

Being disaffected by a majority which excludes minority opinions despite their displayed posture of support for freedom of expression, democracy, and affirmative action, ILBE users oppose major online ideologies. They have rightist or conservative sentiments not because they actually agree with such ideologies, but rather because of their “anti against anti” sentiment (Chung, 2012). In the following sections, ILBE users’ distasteful behaviours, even seemingly evil acts, are discussed as being reactions to liberals’ hypocrisies. Because of
this, a view exists that the emergence of ILBE could be viewed as the problem of the leftists rather than of the rightists. The novelist Lee Seung-jun has commented that “ILBE is the illegitimate child of political leftists who are corrupted, incapable, hypocrite and snobby” (Lee, 2015). The cultural critic Choi Tae-sub explained that it is “a tendency of the ‘post-democratization generation’ who cannot feel the weight of democracy, as nearing the end of period in which democratization justified everything” (Chung, 2012, Translated).

Slurs against the subjects of ILBE’s hatred, such as leftists, feminists, Jeolla-do residents and sexual minorities, mostly occur in this mode. The main reason for the hatred toward these marginalized groups is rooted in the claim that they are not actually discriminated against, but rather, are privileged by the social welfare system and proactive action (Cheon, 2014). To be specific, the existence of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in South Korea is an example often referred to by ILBE users as “a sign of reverse discrimination against males in Korean society.” And this is where the nationalist narrative operates as an effective scheme to justify aversion toward “free-riders” who steal taxpayers’ monies. ILBE users’ criticism against victims of the 2014 Sewol ferry tragedy uses the same smear. ILBE users claim to stand on nationalist and patriotic values as they defame the families of Sewol ferry victims in two ways: (i) the defamatory slur against those families that they feel unreasonably sought monetary compensation from the government for a personal tragedy; and (ii) the further slur that compensation amounts for the Sewol victims were too much compared to what were allotted to the victims of the Korean Navy Cheonan sinking in 2010, and of the Yeonpyeong shelling in 2011, which ideologically armed ILBE with conservatism and nationalism (Jay, H., 2012).

**Competition of Derision.** An example of a posting directly showing ILBE’s nationalist or racist sentiment is the posting titled “Baek Chung-kang actually has manners! He doesn’t eat all.” It includes a picture of a smiling westerner devoid of arms and legs. Baek Chung-
kang is a Korean Chinese singer. Among ILBE users, the notion “Korean Chinese immigrants commit vicious crimes and even eat human flesh; thus they should be exiled” is widespread. Through such posts, ILBE impliedly shares and spreads revulsion of, and antagonism against, immigrant workers.

How is this possible? The two most representative factors are derision and competition. Of note is that Internet traffic investigation instances usually classify ILBE as a humour-site (Kim, 2014). And, as mentioned supra, the Korean online community is more heavily populated by leftists/liberals, whose dominant weapons are satire and derision. This tendency became most apparent during the Lee Myung-bak administration’s conservative years, 2008-2011, as liberal online websites ceaselessly parodied the president and his camp followers in texts, pictures, and videos (Kim, 2014).

ILBE is the first full-scale right/conservative site equipped with the so-called “humour” code that used to be the weapon of the leftists. Although conservative/rightist/racist online sites existed previously, they generally were overly serious and formal, characteristics which were major obstacles to securing popular appeal. Then ILBE attacked the leftist camp in exactly the same way but even more nastily than the method those leftists had used against the rightists (Kim, 2014). Lee (2013) expressed it so: “ILBE’s extreme rightism is a toadstool that grew from this reality. The sarcastic satire and humour that once tore down the authoritarianism of the conservatism is now targeting the vested liberals.” And “humour” and “prank” are useful excuses when driving an attack on an opponent to its extremes, while such attacks simultaneously generate popular appeal.

Another ILBE characteristic is “competition”. Unlike many other community sites that use honorifics, ILBE users talk down to each other and confer grades depending on their

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activities. One’s grade is elevated by recommendations one earns for one’s posting, aiming at it being a “popular posting”. One’s grade declines if one’s posting earns non-recommendations (called “democratization” as a derision of democracy). This system is a decisive factor in prompting users’ competitive postings of aggressive and arousing contents. The formal statement of a user arrested for insulting the former president declared that his motivation was his wish to create a “popular posting” (Park, 2013). Commentators of course have pointed out that this competitive fashioning inhibits ILBE users from sharing any collective and communal identity and sentiments, thus characterizing the ILBE community as mere fragments, apart from any sort of genuine membership sense and/or privileges.

**Self-Criticizing Sentiment.** Remarkably, ILBE users’ hatred is directed not only externally but also internally, i.e., toward themselves also. In a bizarre variation of the mea culpa (I am to blame) principle, users call themselves “idiots” or “defectives” or worse. Such self-criticism or self-degradation is best described as a form of dysphemia, i.e., commenting offensively about oneself and about others because one is motivated by self-loathing and by loathing those others. Of course, this provides a convenient vehicle for the use of wicked language (Cheon, 2014; Kim, 2014).

On one hand, such self-criticism sarcastically reveals the young generation’s sense of deprivation. As in many other nations, in South Korea, the issue of youth unemployment has become a serious social problem. Given the older generation’s occupation of fine jobs, the younger generation often faces the situation of having mainly part-time jobs being available to them. A new terminology has even emerged, namely the 880,000-won generation (who earn about US$800 [about 880,000 South Korea won] a month), referring to youths’ employment prospects (Woo and Park, 2007). While liberal youths’ anger is directed at the upper class or the government, that of ILBE users’ mainly targets the so-called 386 generation (those born in the 1960s who were in university in the 1980s, when
democratization reached its apex). Many of the 386 generation are leftists or liberals who still complain about the current system although they could have been employed in sound jobs, and who, with much less effort, could have established themselves as societal pivots. ILBE intensively attacks their hypocrisy. This can be interpreted as the reaction of the younger generation who feel isolated from the 386 group, which privatizes democratization as its exclusive property (Chung, 2012).

**Comparison with Japan’s Netto-uyo**

Japan’s Netto-uyo has been started from about the 2002 FIFA Korea-Japan World Cup. Japanese freelance journalist Yasuda Koichi, author of “*The Internet and Patriotism*”, which discusses *Netto-uyo Zaitoku-kai*, explains that the economic recession and the social unrest that continued during the late 1990s spawned the anger that was derived from the notion that immigrant workers are a “work-depriving force”, targeting Korean-Japanese who account for one-third of immigrants in Japan (McLelland, 2008; C. Kim, 2013; Sakamoto, 2011).

Further radicalization on the Internet occurs when widespread frustrations, despondencies, and even fears, are rife (all these, for example, are the inevitable sensations of many for whom, for prolonged periods, no employment is available). In such a situation, alas, some group or instance is blamed, and catchy hate-slogans emerge without justification but with awful harm. The above-mentioned “work-depriving force” is one such slogan. In the face of such polemic (one might liken it to a wildfire), those of good sense depart the scene, leaving it to the radicals, and real intellect and reason departs. That, essentially, is what happened in the Japanese situation described by Chung (2013) and Yasuda Koichi (2012).

In part, this explains the growth sequence. In January 2007, after growing its online presence, 100 netizens who agreed to “establish an active organization that carries out visible actions, as, with only the internet [*sic*], one cannot change the world,” inaugurated the first *Zaitokukai*. Its support base was gathered through collective action and hostile statements
towards Korean Japanese, and by February 2012, it had grown into the biggest rightist organization in Japan.

ILBE is similar to Netto-uyo in that issues of economic recession, employment shortage, and unsatisfactory reality, are expressed in xenophobic language. However, there is a dissimilarity: unlike Netto-uyo, whose foci of attack are mainly international neighbours like Korean Japanese, ILBE’s main targets are internal minorities or allegedly free-riders. Also, unlike Netto-uyo, which has taken its agenda to the street, ILBE currently (i.e., at the time of this writing – mid-2015) is highly unlikely to organize itself into the reality of now. Indeed, ILBE users pursue complete decentralization and are highly resistant to “friendship acts” (forming individual rapport). While other national and racist online groups aim at an expanded community with a traditional hierarchical system so as to be an effective and influential organization, ILBE tends to resist any form of anti-democratic system within an organization. The ideal online community for ILBE users is representation of ideas based on absolute equalitarianism, and achieved (ILBE believes successfully) by absolute anonymity, a fact-based approach, an unmoderated competition system, and the creation of a zero-privilege, zero-hierarchy environment.

In short, despite ILBE being rightist, its conduct does not derive from firm ideological principles, like Netto-uyo, but rather from its pursuit and purpose of amusement (Kwak, 2013). Of interest is whether ILBE will grow into a strong rightist/nationalist organization like Netto-uyo, which emerged 10 years earlier, or simply remain netizens thriving on racist humour.

**Conclusion**

Contrary to the widely held belief that the Internet would facilitate the formation of a global village, and engender a marketplace of ideas, thus contributing to widespread liberalism and democracy, nowadays the younger generation in South Korea – suffering as
they do from economic depression and unemployment – tend towards cynicism about social progress. Korean nationalism started from the economic recession, the ideological vacuum after the disappearance of industrialization and democratization success stories, and the neoliberalist generation’s sense of helplessness. An online characteristic is that such a sense of helplessness is expressed as provocative fun and entertainment, instead of as serious introspection. In this sense, some aver that Korean and Japanese youths’ rightward shift is degradation rather than conservatism. The reduction of conventional language to short-message structuring, as in Twitter and other social media, and the growth of reflective and emotional responses, as per the limitless use of “like” buttons, aggravate users’ tendencies to create content that are more provocative and sensational than that of others’ without proper consideration of the consequences or of the extent of the resultant hurt and shock from thus-unchecked wording and disgusting images (Joo, 2013).

Ironically, although ILBE is becoming a social problem in today’s Korean society, it represents Korean males’ simple and humble hope and desire for recognition as “good patriarchs” (Kim, 2014). However, its forms of expression are highly antisocial and dismissive of authority. Recent research on online communities points out that ILBE’s extreme expression and aggression wholly took over the online leftist subculture it so much loathes. That is, ILBE’s destructive expression now targets vested leftists, the original initiator of that sarcastic satire and humour that once dragged down conservatives’ authoritarianism (Kim, 2014). Thus, nationalist discourses on ILBE in the current state may not be political but may be simply hostile instead, an expression of animosity towards the older generation and a form of amusement through which Internet alter egos relieve their stress. However, as the case of Zaitokukai demonstrates, no one can predict how nationalism, initiated in simple anger, might advance.

Accordingly, scholars and opinion leaders have warned that to prevent ILBE from
propagating further extreme right-wingism or jingoism, the whole society should reconsider what is necessary in South Korea to build trust and unity politically, economically, pertaining to regional conflicts, and addressing the generation divide. That is, the fundamental question is whether social-, economic-, cultural-, and gender-repression in daily and professional lives still reside over the whole society, rather than the wholly ethical political and institutional democratization of society? If social leaders and the older generation in South Korea simply ignore fundamental social issues that drive seemingly ordinary law-abiding citizens to seek alter egos to enjoy hardcore subcultures and to relieve stress and pressures, the so-called ILBE phenomenon will continue even if ILBE itself is closed or blocked\(^2\). And it will not stay a subculture but will flourish with more mass appeal.

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\(^2\) A congressman, Shin Kyoung-min, attempted to shut down the ILBE community with the communication law but faced a backlash from ILBE users and the conservative party as it possibly violates freedom of speech. http://www.polinews.co.kr/news/article.html?no=176856.
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Figure 1. Major online communities in South Korea