

THE CYBER BULLYING OF POP STAR TABLO AND SOUTH KOREAN SOCIETY: HEGEMONIC DISCOURSES ON EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND MILITARY SERVICE*

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The cyber harassment of South Korean pop star Tablo circa 2010 illustrates numerous interlocking social issues including Internet participation, perpetuation of hate crimes and slander, globalization, nationalism, military service, and the vital importance of education in Korean society. This case indicates the necessity of revisiting the Internet's functions in social movement and communication. To explore why and how this unique online incident occurred in South Korea,¹ I reviewed the literature on Internet research, criminology, and hegemony. After conducting these reviews, two broad aims for this study became clear. The first is to critically examine the ways that some bloggers spread baseless rumors about Tablo. The second aim is to clarify the circumstances in which current hegemonic discourses have developed in Korea on military service and educational background. My argument is that neither grand concepts nor generalizations can capture the intrinsic attributes of the Internet and online participation (in or outside of Korea). Instead, discontinuity, plurality, and contingency, rather than progress and inevitability, approximate the reality of the Internet and online participation. For this reason, scholarship is needed that inquires into more nuanced practices of the Internet that are also situated in social environments and articulated with local histories. Revisiting the Tablo case encourages Koreans to rethink and re-embrace the values of coexistence and tolerance.

Keywords: cyber bullying, globalization, Korean nationalism, military service, educational background

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¹ Hereafter, Korea.

1. INTRODUCTION

Want me to stop breathing?
 Want me to lose my eyesight?
 Want to drive a nail into my heart?
 Want me locked in darkness?
 Want me to close off my mind?
 ...
 Your words, words, words, those cruel words
 Heart-wrenching words, bladelikey words
 ...
 Why is everybody
 Breakin' breakin' breakin' me down
 Everybody breakin' breakin' breakin' me down
 Everybody breakin' breakin' breakin' me down
 ...²

The above lyrics are parts of a Korean song *Wordkill* that addresses the affliction of cyber bullying. This form of online persecution, also called Internet bullying, involves using information technology (IT) devices such as computers or cell phones to intimidate, harass, or cause harm to an individual or group of people (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatson, 2008; Willard, 2006). As more and more people interact online in this Information Age, when more and more people are also exposed to diverse forms of information and use online communities to share ideas and explore issues that range from individual hobbies to politics and sexuality, rates of cyber bullying are also increasing. Society is understandably alarmed about this negative form of personal relationship, which sometimes leads to victims' suicides; parents, educators, and law enforcement officials are particularly concerned. The problem is further noted in Korea because the country ranks first in suicide among all member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and because bullying both on- and offline seems to have caused many teenagers to commit suicide (Kwon, 2013).

Wordkill is sung by Lee Seon-woong (Yi Sŏn-ung), a Korean rapper, songwriter, producer, DJ, and actor who is better known by his stage name, Tablo (T'abŭllo). His celebrity as leader of the Korean hip-hop group Epik High began in the early 2000s, when it became common for Korean music and TV dramas to become popular abroad due to the phenomenon known as the Korean Wave (Shim, 2006; Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). But unlike his peers, Tablo's star dimmed

² *Wordkill* (Mithra Jin & Tablo. 2010). Original Korean lyrics translated by the author.

after he fell victim to an organized group of cyber bullies who initially alleged—falsely—that he had forged bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Stanford University. They later escalated their harassment when it became known that, because of his Canadian citizenship, Tablo did not fulfill Korea’s mandatory military service.

What is of note in this case is that the bullies justified their actions by claiming that they were defending fairness and justice within Korean society. The fact that the membership of *Tajinyo* (T’ajinyo), an online community for Tablo’s cyber bullies, comprised 190,000 at its peak indicates the sociocultural importance of this case in Korea. More generally, the cyber harassment of Tablo illustrates numerous interlocking social issues including Internet participation, perpetuation of hate crimes and slander, globalization, nationalism, military service, and the vital importance of education in Korean society.

In fact, Korea has pursued globalization since the early 1990s. In 1994, in response to the increasing international competition wrought by globalization, President Kim Young-sam (Kim Yŏng-sam) announced a new governmental policy of *seggyehma* (globalization), which has influenced every corner of Korean society ever since. Thus it is ironic that the career of Tablo, a Korean who traversed national borders as a successful student and musician and therefore could have become a symbol of the new, globalized Korea, was ruined by baseless allegations.

It is also ironic that the Internet, whose development and use in Korea has been closely intertwined with the process of globalization, has become a bastion of particularistic nationalist ideas. The Internet has been hailed as a tool for democratic participation, social change, and connectivity (Ferdinand, 2000; Saco, 2002). In January 2014, even Pope Francis I joined the ranks of Internet optimists by declaring that the Internet “offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity” and therefore is “a gift from God” (Fung & Boorstein, 2014). Therefore, the cyber harassment of Tablo indicates the necessity of revisiting the Internet’s functions in social movement and communication.

To explore why and how this unique online incident occurred in Korea, I reviewed the literature on Internet research, criminology, and hegemony. After conducting these reviews, two broad aims for this study became clear. The first is to critically examine the ways that some online bloggers spread baseless rumors about Tablo. The second aim is to clarify the circumstances in which current hegemonic discourses have developed in Korea on military service and educational background. Looking at this case in the context of Korea’s obsession with globalization, the military service and education shows us the ways the Internet as a global communication tool becomes a way for Koreans to debate

topics of national obsession. And we find the national and global are intertwined as the national topic is distinctly global—Tablo's education in Stanford.

My argument is that neither grand concepts nor generalizations can capture the intrinsic attributes of the Internet and online participation (in or outside of Korea). Instead, discontinuity, plurality, and contingency, rather than progress and inevitability, approximate the reality of the Internet and online participation. For this reason, scholarship is needed that inquires into more nuanced practices of the Internet that are also situated in social environments and articulated with local histories. I begin with a review of the scholarship that framed my analysis.

2. RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1 Globalization, Media, and Participation

Within the context of globalization, it is important to understand how people's ideas about their society and the world have changed as a result of their experiences with new media and their exposure to diverse cultures through new media. Because of the global dominance of U.S. media, and the singularity of its influence upon the lives and thinking of people all over the world, many people have subscribed to the thesis of cultural imperialism, which proposes that American culture is directly threatening the survival of smaller, weaker cultures (Tomlinson, 2001). According to this view, global cultures are expected to become homogeneous as they conform to the norms set by U.S. media. Because of its simplistic view, however, many scholars have moved away from cultural imperialism in favor of theories that emphasize adaptation within the roles played by active audiences as well as the development of SNS (social network service) and other communication technologies (Iwabuchi, 2002; Jenkins, 2004; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). The well-known theorist of globalization, Appadurai (1996) also asks us to pay attention to the functions of media technologies above all else, which made a "common imagined world" possible.

In fact, the digital revolution has allowed media content to flow across diverse media platforms and users of new media to migrate anywhere in the world, regardless of national borders, in search of content. It is media users' active participation that consummates the so-called digital revolution. This consummation can be understood in the context of Pierre Lévy's (1997) examination of participatory culture on the World Wide Web, which centers upon the concept of "collective intelligence." According to Lévy, Internet users combine individual expertise in the service of common goals, and the resultant "knowledge communities" allow consumers to effectively negotiate with powerful media producers. As this process unfolds, an alternative sociopolitical force emerges that

will compete with or challenge the hegemony of the nation-state and other official authorities. Lévy views knowledge communities as the basis for restoring democracy, in that the participants play and work together; in addition, the process of contributing their knowledge and expertise makes them feel as if they have real influence on the development and future of the community.

Influenced by the concept of collective intelligence, Henry Jenkins (2006) examines the activities of online fan communities. For example, fans of the movie franchise *Matrix* depend on each other to understand character backgrounds and plot points and to make inter-textual connections about the films, which are themselves highly self-allusory. As Lévy (1997) states, “No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity” (p. 20). The emergence of collective intelligence in the context of the Internet has made it possible for web users to ferret out complex meanings in the *Matrix* films. Another example involves a fictional school newspaper for Hogwarts, the boarding school featured in the *Harry Potter* series. In the process of creating this paper, the *Daily Prophet*, more than 100 *Harry Potter* fans around the world write and interact with each other as fictional personas. These contributors to the *Daily Prophet* have both cultivated their love for reading and writing and have bridged their differences in age, gender, nationality, and education. According to Jenkins (2006), this type of “convergence culture,” which encourages participation and collaboration, will eventually lead to a fairer and more democratic society.

Such online participants also mirror observations made by digital theorist Howard Rheingold (2003): “Smart mobs [i.e., knowledge communities and participants in convergence culture] consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don’t know each other” (p. xii). He adds that, equipped with devices for communication, they will exert a new form of power. In this vein, political consultant Joe Trippi (2004) explicitly celebrates the new era in which people are empowered by the Internet:

The power is shifting from institutions that have always been run top-down, hoarding information at the top, telling us how to run our lives, to a new paradigm of power that is democratically distributed and shared by all of us. (2004, p. 4; cited in Jenkins, 2006, p. 211)

Such optimistic views about the democratic, liberatory potential of technology date back to Karl Marx and Herbert Marcuse (Baudrillard, 1981). Walter Benjamin (2010) argues that it became obvious in the early twentieth century that mechanical reproduction would dethrone cultural authorities, and that people would feel more empowered in making cultural choices and political decisions.

2.2 Hate Crimes, Hegemony, and Discourse

Since the early 1800s, the discipline of criminology has developed a number of theories to account for crime. The mainstream, positivist tradition has presented lifestyle exposure theory (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garoffalo, 1978), routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), and social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), which share a tendency to emphasize personal elements and to find causes of crime in terms of biological or psychological factors. For example, social control theory holds that criminals are those who lack the internal discipline to abide by the social norms that would inhibit deviant behavior.

Within the literature of criminology, strain theories began to take account of the role of socio-cultural factors in hate crimes and popular victimizations (Merton, 1957; Perry, 2001). Strain theories, which are based on the works of Émile Durkheim (Durkheim and Giddens, 1972) explain deviant behavior as a result of the discrepancy between culturally shared goals and the availability of ways to attain them. When access to resources necessary for success is unequally distributed in a society, those who are unable to compete experience strain as a consequence. In this type of situation, a person who accepts the culturally defined goals of society—but rejects or is rejected by the legitimate means to attain them—is the most likely type of person to resort to criminal behavior, which he or she will engage in to resolve this strain (Merton, 1957).

Masao Maruyama's (1963) concept of "transfer of oppression," which is related to strain theory and was initially designed to interpret Japanese atrocities during World War II, offers insight into the case of Tablo's harassment. According to Maruyama, oppressive hierarchy in a society is responsible for the desire to dominate and abuse those who are inferior in the pecking order. Low-ranking Japanese soldiers who were treated brutally by their superiors, for example, would in turn brutalize colonized Koreans, Chinese, and other Asians because these groups were subordinate to them during the war (Hillenbrand, 2010). Thus, in some sense, criminals are also victims of unequal and unjust societies. This strand of understanding about crime and deviant behavior laid the foundation for the development of a theoretical strand broadly defined as critical criminology.

Influenced by Marxism, feminism, and British cultural studies, critical criminology pays attention to the relationship between hegemonic ideas of a society and crime, and explores the historical reality in which a particular type of crime is located. For example, critical criminology notes the criminal behavior of the powerful and argues that hate crime is an outcome of attempts to maintain an entrenched sociocultural hierarchy. Here, the concept of power encompasses "the ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideas and define morality, in short,

to assert hegemony” (Connell, 1995, p. 107). The cultural-political concept of hegemony was developed by Antonio Gramsci (2009), who posited that the ruling class manipulates the prevailing system of values and worldviews to justify and maintain its hegemony (i.e., the status quo of domination over subordinate classes). Therefore, power is not merely supported by force but is also effectively supported by consent that is exercised in discursive practices. Teun van Dijk (1996) adds that discourse is central to the “enactment, expression, legitimation and acquisition” of all forms of power (p. 2).

Hegemonic discourses produce ideas of how the world should be and define a mythical norm against which all others are judged. According to Omi and Winant (1994), national policies create discursive practices by which not only the mythical norm of Us but also its antithesis, the Other, are constructed and reaffirmed. In this process, nationalist discourses evoke and exploit perceived threats posed by the Other. To the extent that this order is fully accepted by the members of a society, a cultural climate of intolerance emerges that confers permission to hate the Other, along with popular forms of repression that render the Other vulnerable to victimization and demonization (Goldberg, 1995; Hudson, 1993; Lorde, 1995; Perry, 2001).

Some scholars (Im, 2000; Suh, 2012) argue that histories of suffering from foreign invasion have made Korea a fertile ground for the practice of Othering. In particular, modern-era events such as the Korean War and the subsequent military dictatorship have contributed to the persecution and mistreatment of any Other who does not conform to the mythical norm, which Moon (2005) defines as the fulfilment of military service by an ethnic Korean male. Based on this knowledge from my literature review, I shall examine Korean history, national policies, and sociocultural beliefs in relation to their contributions to constructing hegemonic discourses on educational background and military service in Korea. In the next section, I shall examine who Tablo is, the process of his victimization, and the main issues and allegations of the cyber bullying he experienced.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CYBER HARASSMENT AGAINST TABLO

Tablo was born in Seoul in 1980. Because of his father’s occupation, during his early childhood the family was relocated several times to Switzerland, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. When he was eight years old, the family moved to Canada. After being expelled from school in the ninth grade for his involvement in a fight, Tablo moved back to Seoul to finish his secondary education. During his school days, he learned several musical instruments, played violin in an orchestra, and composed

music (Lee & Kim, 2007). Due to his talent in creative writing, he was accepted by both Harvard and Stanford universities. As a coterminal student at Stanford, he earned both a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's degree in creative writing in three-and-a-half years. During three of his years at Stanford, Tablo associated with an underground hip-hop band.

Back in Seoul after graduating from Stanford, Tablo pursued a musical career despite his father's objections. In 2003 he released his first official album as a leader of Epik High, alongside two other members: Mithra Jin and DJ Tukutz, whom he had met in the underground hip-hop scene in Seoul. Epik High's first two albums were commercial failures; in order to boost public recognition of his music, Tablo began appearing as a personality in TV entertainment shows. He also acted in TV sitcoms, worked as a DJ for a major radio station, and became a main presenter of a music show on the KBS TV network (allkpop.com, 2008). Thanks in part to these activities, Epik High's third album, *Swan Songs* (2005), became a huge commercial success and received critical acclaim as well. Epik High's fourth album, released in 2007, achieved even bigger success and became the third best-selling album in Korea that year (*Hankook Ilbo*, 2008).

Since his debut as leader of Epik High, Tablo has produced and written (or co-written) almost all the band's songs. In late 2008, Tablo published a book in Korean, *Tangsin ïï chogak tïil*, and an English version, *Pieces of You*, in early 2009. Both books achieved moderate commercial success and, for a first-time author, received positive critical reception (*Break News*, 2008). During these years, Tablo's Stanford background also became an object of great interest in Korean society, which strongly emphasizes educational background. He and his family were often interviewed by mainstream newspapers and family magazines about his academic achievement. Although some people were jealous of Tablo's rare achievements both in school and on stage, more people loved him for the sarcastic social criticism in his music and for his personal charm (Park, 2005).

In 2010, some netizens posed questions about Tablo's educational background and set up online communities to discuss them. The most notable of these doubters gathered in two online communities: "We Urge Tablo to Tell the Truth," better known by its Korean acronym, *Tajinyo*, and "World Where the Common Sense is the Truth," a.k.a. *Sangjinse*. Members of these communities contended that it was unbelievable for a person to finish both bachelor's and master's degrees within such a short period, from a university as prestigious as Stanford (Kim, 2010). In order to prove this claim, both *Tajinyo* and *Sangjinse* gathered and detailed all kinds of data on Tablo including his immigration records, SAT scores, academic transcripts, and yearbook photographs. To these they added distorted

facts and disputed his educational background with counternarratives that, to them, seemed logical.

To bolster their conclusion that Tablo was lying about his educational background, these groups posted slogans on their websites, for example: “We are the people who are concerned about the truth. But Tablo as a public figure is lying about himself. In order to establish justice in this society, we request him to reveal the truth.” They also claimed that Tablo had intentionally avoided mandatory military service by maintaining dual citizenship in Korea and Canada. On *Sangjinse*, one blogger asked: “Why does Tablo dodge his military service while entertaining all kinds of privileges in Korean society? I am angered at his foul play!” The agitators’ online harassment, while overt, was also evasive because the Internet provided a safe haven in which the perpetrators could conceal their identities while making any claims they wished. At the time when this controversy was headline news in the Korean media, the media reports created a snowball effect that encouraged people who had previously been nonchalant about the issue to log on to these online communities and read the bullies’ accusations.

Initially, Tablo laughed off suspicion about the veracity of his educational degrees. However, the cyber-agitation spread offline when *Tajinyo* members began to make hostile phone calls to Tablo. The bullying became so blatant that even his parents experienced harassment: agitators visited a beauty salon run by Tablo’s mother, disrupted her business, and publicly questioned whether his father had in fact graduated from the prestigious Seoul National University (SNU). As a result of this stalking and harassment, Tablo’s life was so badly disrupted that he ceased his normal career routines and entered mental health treatment. “I have known that a word vindication is connected with aggressors,” he posted on Twitter (June 3, 2010). “I feel heartbroken and dejected when I find so many people are demanding vindication from me.”

In June 2010, Tablo attempted to verify his academic history by making a public showing of his transcripts from Stanford. But the doubters demanded more proof, arguing that those documents were forged (*Korea Herald*, 2010). When his old friends from Stanford formed a Facebook page to defend him, *Tajinyo* suggested that all those people were actors hired by Tablo. In a TV interview, apparently dejected, Tablo interpreted the bullies’ acts by saying, “It is not that they can’t believe in me, but that they are unwilling to believe” (MBC, 2010). According to statements Tablo made to the media at the time, he even considered giving up his musical career. Eventually, in August 2010, he charged twenty-two netizens amongst the most active cyber bullies with defamation of character (Oh, 2010).

This cyber agitation controversy can be reduced to two issues: 1) a stubborn public disbelief that Tablo attended Stanford University as a regular student and obtained both bachelor's and master's degrees in three-and-a-half years; and 2) public anger over Tablo's exemption from military service based on his Canadian citizenship. In the next sections, I shall examine the sociocultural background of these two issues in order to discuss how these kinds of disbelief continued and why such widespread anger was directed at Tablo.

4. HEGEMONIC DISCOURSES ON EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Korea, lacking natural resources, invests in human capital, or education, to ensure national development and prosperity. In addition, Koreans have traditionally placed a high value on education; as a result of a strong Confucian influence, they consider it the fastest path to upward social mobility. For example, more than 80% of high school graduates in Korea today go on to enroll at two- or four-year colleges, even though they may remain unemployed after college because the corporate sector cannot absorb so many graduates (McNeill, 2011). Many scholars and observers have noted that Korea has been able to compress the growth of centuries into a generation, thanks to the society's zeal for education (Lee & Brinton, 1996; McNeill, 2011; Park, 2010). In this process, however, Korea has become an intensely competitive society that puts such a premium on degrees that educational and social problems have arisen as a result.

The education zeal in Korea is such that Kim Sang-bong (2004), a social critic and philosopher, argues that Korea has become a "class society" in which a person's social class is determined by his or her educational background, particularly the prestige of the college he or she attended. According to Park (2010), "for most Koreans, the preparation for the entrance examinations for elite schools and colleges became a nearly life-and-death matter, driving the whole society into an 'examination hell'" (p. 582). In fact, the mental pressure from academic competition among K-12 students is so huge as to cause a significant number to commit suicide (Kwon, 2013). Nevertheless, Korean parents do not lower their educational aspirations, which means that K-12 students have to study for long hours to compete for college entrance examinations.

In this environment, South Korean families spend more on private education than any other country in the world (McNeill, 2011). As of 2011, roughly 72% of students underwent private tutoring, and it is often reported by the media that some elementary school students take as much as five hours of private tutorials every day (Choi, 2012). Against this backdrop, government has attempted to enact

various forms of regulations on supplementary educational institutions (*hagwŏn*), such as forbidding them from offering tutoring after 10 p.m. The intensity of the competition for educational background, which puts financial pressure on the middle and working classes, has led to the stigmatization of private tutoring as a “a nation-destroying malaise” (*Korea Herald*, 1998). Moreover, average families feel frustrated by media reports that students from richer families that can afford expensive private lessons tend to have better chances to enter top universities (Kwon, 2004).

The recent “English fever” in Korean society deserves attention as well (Shim & Park, 2008). Because English is an important subject in college entrance examinations, some Korean parents have even decided to send their young children overseas to learn English. The prevalence of this “early study abroad” (*chogi yuhak*) migration, in which children are often accompanied by their mothers while their fathers remain in Korea to earn the money to support their study abroad, has produced the term “wild geese families” (*kirŏgi gajok*). The pressure to study English continues even after college, because many firms periodically test their employees’ English competency. Thus, both English competency and educational background function as much-coveted symbolic capital in Korea. Tablo, because of his background and skills, has symbolic capital that is highly valued in this society. He is not only a pop star but also a graduate from a prestigious American university, which means that he is supposed to have an excellent command of English.

People’s harboring doubts about Tablo’s educational background partly sprang from the 2007 diploma fabrication scandal in Korea that involved an array of celebrities. Triggered by a news report in July 2007 that celebrated art curator Shin Jeong-ah (Sin Chŏng-a) had faked her degrees from the University of Kansas and Yale University, a nationwide series of allegations and confessions followed. Next, after the state prosecutor’s office began a full-scale investigation into forged credentials and plagiarized doctoral dissertations, the scandal attained an unexpected magnitude. The revelations shook Korean society and dealt major blows to the reputations and careers of people in education, the arts, and cultural industries; these included a renowned actress, Yoon Suk-hwa (Yun Suk-hwa), and a revered Buddhist monk, the Venerable Jigwang (Chigwang). Some of the accused received jail sentences; others were repentant and asked for public absolution; and many were ousted from public life (Biemiller, 2008; Harden, 2007).

The immediate response to this scandal was to call for reform in Korean society. In relation to the social problems caused by the extreme focus on the value of “brand-name” schools, some Koreans have long felt that reform is imperative. Measures to restructure local education systems, or at least to reform

college entrance methods, have been attempted many times since the 1960s. The government and some opposing parties have even considered the abolition of SNU, the nation's most prestigious institution of higher learning, in order to eliminate the elite school hierarchy. However, the reform movement lost its momentum in the wake of the 2007 scandal because the government and civil society could not agree upon the details of this transformation.

Thus the discourse of education zeal remains enshrined, while ordinary Korean people continue to be unceasingly interpellated by the ideals of educational excellence and values of "brand-name" schools. In this situation, people tend to find a rotten apple or a scapegoat, as an anonymous blogger posted at *Tajinyo*: "I am infuriated to find diploma forgers like Tablo. While there are so many people who work really hard to enter colleges, Tablo is deceiving innocent people with bogus achievement." Although this blogger mistakenly targeted Tablo, the writing reveals a widely held sentiment with regard to the values of education zeal.

Another noteworthy phenomenon is the online vigilante groups or cyber-posses that played an important role in the 2007 scandal. These groups would track down norm violators and criminals using their IT devices and the Internet. Their presence and acts became well known after the incident of the "Dog Poop Girl" (a loose translation of *kaettongnyŏ*). In 2005, a Seoul subway commuter posted photographs of a woman and her dog on a popular website, with the explanation that the woman had refused to clean up the mess her dog had made on the floor of a subway car. This story spread rapidly over the web, where netizens clamored for more information in an attempt to punish the woman for her behavior (Yi, 2012). Online vigilantes were able to identify her within days; after this, she reportedly dropped out of her university due to public humiliation (Krim, 2005).

The impact of this scandal, which became national news in Korea and was even covered by the *Washington Post*, was so huge that most Korean newspapers ran editorials of concern over online privacy issues, and TV channels organized special programs in which experts and college professors discussed the Internet's power to connect and transform society (*Korea Times*, 2005). But when the so-called "Shin Jeong-ah scandal" occurred in 2007, Internet bloggers who contributed to tracking down degree forgers were given the honorable title of "netizen forensic investigators" (a loose translation of the Korean term *net'ijŭn susadae*; this term was coined in reference to the popular American TV series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*). Subsequently, ordinary people have begun to believe that Internet bloggers can resolve any social doubts, and to have faith in the veracity of information discovered and shared on the web. This belief and faith produced

a situation in which ordinary people could not simply disregard the acts of *Tajinyo* and others.

5. HEGEMONIC IDEAS ABOUT MILITARY SERVICE AND NATIONALISM

Whereas many theorists argue that the concept of nation was developed in the modern era both out of a sociological necessity and as an imagined community (Anderson 2006; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1998), some historians such as John Duncan (1998) and Sin Yong-ha (2000) claim that consciousness of the same Korean peoplehood and cultural homogeneity has existed since the Koryŏ Kingdom (918–1392). In any case, the fact that Koreans have lived within a stable territory for more than a thousand years under a series of relatively centralized political regimes has laid a foundation for nationalism to develop more distinctively and much earlier than in many other countries in the world (Lee, 2009). Moreover, the Confucian conception of the state as an extension of the family remained unchallenged among Koreans into the twentieth century, which has led many Koreans to develop strong nationalist sensibilities.

In addition, around the turn of the twentieth century, Korean political leaders and educators began to use the term “nation” in order to articulate their resistance to the invasion of foreign imperialist forces, particularly Japan (Yi, 1984). During the Japanese occupation (1910–1945), Japan attempted to eradicate every idea of the Korean nation and went to great lengths to assimilate the Korean people into the Japanese nation. In order to destroy Korean cultural identity, the colonial authorities banned teaching of Korean language and history at schools towards the end of the colonial period; their most egregious measure was to force Koreans to change their names to Japanese names (Pak & Hwang, 2011). Thus, after Korea was liberated from Japanese rule in 1945, the newly independent Republic of Korea (1948) decided to establish a strong Korean national identity as a cornerstone of its education policy.

The experience of the Korean War (1950–1953), which almost devastated the nascent nation-state, contributed a strong tone of anti-communism to the spiraling rise of nationalism. After seizing power through a military coup in 1961, the Park Chung-Hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) regime (1961–1979) specified and accelerated the following three national policies:

- 1) national defense against communist North Korea
- 2) national identity establishment
- 3) capitalistic industrialization (Kim, 2000)

One of the government initiatives to inculcate the uniform, nationalist identity of Korean-ness among the people was the Charter of National Education, which was written by President Park and publicly announced in 1968. Composed of eight sentences that stress a national sense of duty, the charter began by declaring that “We were born in this land with a historical mission of national revival.” During the Park regime, schoolchildren had to memorize the charter, which was framed and displayed in every classroom and government office, with the result that nationalism became omnipresent in Koreans’ daily life (Lee, 2009).

The Park regime then expanded this emphasis on nationalism and national identity by the militarization of national security, including a justification for the conscription of all able-bodied men nineteen and older on the grounds of the presence or possibility of a territorial threat from P’yŏngyang.³ Universal conscription assumed a pivotal role within all three of the policies listed above. Most basically, military service produces human resources to pursue the economic development led by the state and large conglomerates, or *chaebŏl*. In the army, soldiers are trained to prepare themselves to follow orders and to be adaptive to any type of environment. Thus the regular ideological education provided by the army simultaneously cultivates anti-communism, nationalism, and obedience.

When Korean men are discharged from military service, they are well prepared for whatever jobs they are given by their employers. In other words, men are transformed while they serve in the military to be part of the nation-state system. Not surprisingly, the Korean government has invested industrial labor with a good deal of nationalist significance. As Kim and Park (2003) note, work is “regarded as a social obligation, patriotic duty and moral duty, replete with the notion that the more each individual works, the better off everyone is, including the company, and more importantly, the country” (p. 41). During the Park era, industrial workers were often called “industrial warriors” (*sanŏp chŏnsa*) or “export warriors” (*such’ul chŏnsa*), and enterprises were often called “industrial corps” to invoke nationalist sentiments in the mobilization of human resources for economic development (Lee, 2009).

That Korea successfully achieved compressed development during the Park Chung-Hee era confirmed people’s hegemonic consent to universal conscription. As Moon (2005) noted, the Park regime “managed to secure popular acceptance of conscription through an aggressive conscription policy and the indoctrination of the populace through the schools and the mass media” (p. 69). Nonetheless, in terms of the age-old principle of universal male conscription, an able-bodied man who forsakes a man’s duty to his nation has come to be stigmatized in Korea as

³ After completing their regular service, Korean men are required to join reserve forces for up to eight additional years and to participate annually in a week-long tour of duty.

non-Korean or even sub-human. Even religious clerics do not receive exemption, because the right of conscientious objection is not granted in Korea. Instead, the idea that military service is a rite of passage by which boys become men; and that military training cultivates responsibility, temperance, and self-sacrifice, has persisted in Korean society. Some companies send their new hires to a Marine Corps camp for several days as a way to encourage their morale, and some parents encourage their sons to experience barracks life as a way of cultivating mental strength.

The practice of universal conscription has undoubtedly introduced a certain level of routine military culture into Korean society. Within business offices, fellow workers are commonly called by the appellations of their ranks. Army culture has also emphasized a certain idea of unity. For example, it is common for everyone around a table to down their glasses in unison to a senior's shouts of "One shot!" or "Bottoms up!" regardless of whether the dinner is being held for co-workers or schoolmates. This kind of collective engagement influences linguistic practices so strongly that the adjective "our" replaces "my" in Korean speech, and using "we" instead of "I" as the subject term in sentences is so widespread that phrases such as "our mother," "our home," and even "our boyfriend" are used naturally by Koreans.

I do not mean to imply that that the hegemonic view of universal conscription has not been questioned in Korea. It has been questioned, particularly in the late 1990s, when the media broadly exposed military service irregularities and evasion among the wealthy and powerful (Moon, 2005). In response to this exposure a popular furor erupted, based on the suspicion that only the poor and weak were shouldering the burden of military service. In fact, military service requires a strong sense of calling no matter what a soldier's social or economic background might be. Average Korean males sometimes experience inhuman conditions and degrading treatment in the army at a young age, and many sacrifice their youth to serve the nation. The following proverb well illustrates the resentment that arises from these circumstances: "Those exempted from military service are sons of God, those who perform supplementary service are sons of generals, and those who perform regular service are sons of human beings" (cited in Moon, 2005, p. 75). Rumors that somebody somewhere is using his connections or some illegal means to get exempted, or to be posted to better places, are as old as the mandatory conscription rule. Nevertheless, because the idea that conscription is essential to national security has been so deeply engrained in the consciousness of Koreans, military conscription is taken for granted and the concept has not been challenged.

Thus, the role of the media in constructing hegemony around military duty is worth analyzing. In the 1950s and 1960s, many movies displayed healthy images of soldiers or were built around the theme of the Korean War. In the 1970s and 1980s, documentaries featuring barracks life were regularly broadcast on TV. Beginning in the 2000s, when transnational population movements became frequent, Korean mass media often attempted to renew and reaffirm the hegemonic ideology of military duty by featuring stories of young men who moved overseas but returned to Korea for their martial duty as Korean men. By stressing blood and belonging beyond geographical place of upbringing or residence, their presence would reinforce the powerful notion of primordial nationalism among Korean men (Moon, 2005, p. 66).

“If you look Korean and have Korean blood, then you are Korean,” as the popular saying goes. Thus, nationality has mattered little to ordinary Koreans with regard to military service. Considering that the mythical norm in Korea has been established to refer to an ethnic Korean male who fulfilled his military service, the politics of difference defines the Other as one who forsakes conscription. By demonstrating this nonconformity, such men become logically subject to victimization by Korean society. The following two cases involving celebrities provide additional clues to the understanding of popular sentiments regarding military duty.

The first case involves popular singer Yoo Seungjun (Yu Sŭng-jun), whose career suddenly came to a halt in Korea in 2002. Since his debut in 1997, he had enjoyed a wholesome public persona due to his brilliant and energetic dancing style on stage and his repeated statements that he would fulfill his mandatory military service despite having permanent residency status in the United States. But in 2002, right after he received his draft notice, he went to the U.S. and became a naturalized citizen there. Koreans were shocked and enraged at this about-face, and wildly accused him of lies and deceit. In order to signify their disapproval of Yoo as a fellow Korean, some began to call him “Steve Yoo” (his American name) instead of “Yoo Seungjun” (the proper way of addressing him in Korean). For its part, judging his act as a desertion because he did not obey the draft order, the Korean government permanently banned him from returning to Korea. Yoo later begged for forgiveness, perhaps to salvage his career in Korea, but neither public opinion nor the governmental order were changed (allkpop.com, 2012).

The second case concerns K-pop singer Rain (*Pi*), whose real name is Jung Ji-hoon (Chŏng Chi-hun), who has been acknowledged in Korea as an internationally acclaimed entertainer, and who is regarded by many Koreans as having brought great honor to the motherland. His popularity was such that in 2006,

Time magazine named him one of the “100 Most Influential People Who Shape Our World” (Walsh, 2006). The next year, *People* magazine named him on its 2007 “Most Beautiful People” list. Nonetheless, Rain—who was released from his mandatory military service in July 2013—found himself at the very center of public blame while in uniform.

He spent twenty-one months as an “entertainment soldier” in a special promotional unit established by the Defense Ministry. But in January 2013, when a tabloid released photographs of him on a date with actress Kim Tae-hee (Kim T’ae-hŭi) while on work-related duty, he became the focus of public censure (*Sports Dong-A*, 2013). Amid spiraling public criticism over the special treatment that Rain and other entertainment soldiers were receiving, the defense ministry abolished the special unit. Rain, however, was also under criminal investigation for allegedly violating the military code of conduct by spending too many days off duty before being discharged (*Sports Seoul*, 2013). Although he was cleared of these allegations in December 2013, he has not been able to recover his positive image.

In Korea, hegemonic consent to mandatory military service has been pervasive. As Insook Kwon (2001) noted, “despite a history of popular labor and student movements, a similar kind of open, public controversy or resistance toward conscription has never occurred” (p. 27). Instead, public resentment toward conscription has been heaped upon military duty evaders who have been intermittently exposed by the media.

6. COURT RULING ON TABLO’S CYBER BULLIES

A documentary about the Tablo controversy, filmed by the Korean television network MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation) in August 2010, showed Tablo making a trip to the United States to get his documents in person from Stanford University; many of his old friends and professors verified on camera that Tablo attended and graduated from Stanford. However, when it became known that the documentary was to air in October that year, three members of *Sangjinse* filed a court injunction to delay the broadcast until the completion of the prosecutor’s probe into the alleged diploma forgery. Their primary argument was that the documentary would be biased in favor of Tablo and thus could influence the investigation (Kim, 2010a, 2010b), but they even questioned whether Tablo’s acquaintances filmed at Stanford were real. The court dismissed the case, however, and the two-part documentary was broadcast on MBC as scheduled: on October 1 and 8, 2010 (Kang, 2011).

On October 9, 2010, the Seoul Central District Prosecutors’ Office confirmed that Tablo had officially obtained both bachelor’s and master’s degrees from

Stanford University, in 2001 and 2002 (Davis, 2011). At the same time, it issued a warrant for the arrest of the leader of *Tajinyo*, whose online ID was “whatbecomes.” On the same day, the Korean police requested Interpol’s cooperation with this arrest because the blogger had been located in the United States (Kang, 2010). In January 2011, twelve more bloggers were indicted on charges of defamation. In the wake of the prosecutors’ confirmation of Tablo’s Stanford degrees, *Sangjinse* ceased its operation and apologized to Tablo. The remaining agitators encamped in *Tajinyo*, however, pointed out loopholes in the police probe and encouraged other members to keep working on their campaign. On October 12, 2010, they opened a new online community called “We Demand the Truth from Tablo 2,” or *Tajinyo-2*, which was still active as of March 2014. Tablo himself avoided public appearances from October 2010 until he released his solo album *Yölkkot* (Fever’s End) in November 2011 (Jeong, 2011).

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As noted above, the noblest idea of the Information Age is to allow ordinary people to enjoy access to knowledge and information that was previously inaccessible. In this culture of information abundance, Internet users practice “extimacy” (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014) by sharing music files, photos, and intimate thoughts on their blogs, Facebook, and other SNS sites. They feel no qualms about sharing their real identities with strangers, as well as personal information about celebrities—whether or not such information is authentic. It is much easier now for fans and haters alike to keep celebrities under constant surveillance, a situation that encourages the proliferation of cyber harassment (Mohammed, 2012). Thus, numerous celebrities in Korea have become targets for hateful online messages in the 2000s. When popular actress Choi Jin-sil (Ch’oe Chin-sil) committed suicide in 2008, many observers said her death had resulted from malicious online message attacks. In early 2013, Cho Sung-min (Cho Sŏng-min), a former baseball star and ex-husband of Choi Jin-sil, also committed suicide; many believe that his death was also related to personal agony while dealing with bad publicity online.

In accordance with the democratic potential of media technologies and online participation, some members of online discussion sites and some Internet bloggers (e.g., the “netizen forensic investigators”) have played important roles as informed and monitorial citizens in Korean society. However, as we find in the online harassment of Tablo and other celebrities, some of these people have morphed into ideologically driven and stubborn mobs instead of smart mobs. These situations present a clear call for Koreans to think about the dangers of the Information Age, particularly the manipulative aspects of the Internet. We must

bear in mind Anthony Giddens' (1991) insightful remark that "science and technology are double-edged, creating new parameters of risk and danger as well as offering beneficent possibilities for humankind" (pp. 27–28).

Considering that the online harassment of Tablo involved hegemonic issues of educational background and military service, to which ordinary Koreans are deeply sensitive, I have explored relevant Korean sociocultural contexts. Tablo, who had been praised for his rare academic achievement, was suspected of lying about his Stanford degrees. Strongly believing that Tablo had breached a social contract about fair competition for educational achievement, groups of netizens harassed him and attempted to rationalize their acts in the name of justice. In this article, I have shown that a socio-psychological divide has formed in Korea based on the variations in educational background among Korean people. Following Maruyama's (1963) concept, we may conclude that some Koreans transferred their sense of personal oppression, which had resulted from social strain during their own competition for academic admissions and degrees, to Tablo—who underwent a different process in his pursuit of higher education.

In Tablo's case we also find a clash between hegemonic discourses about universal male conscription and cosmopolitan citizenship against the backdrop of particularistic nationalism in the age of globalization. The Korean government has actively pursued globalization, which is supposed to realize a vision in which a person, irrespective of nationality or ethnicity, competes against others based only on individual talent and capability. Nevertheless, nationalist discourses about military service have prevailed over a vision of globalization in Korea because anachronistic nationalism is intertwined with common sense in Korea (Cho, 2008). Therefore, ordinary Koreans do not equate figure skater Kim Yuna (Kim Yŏn-a), footballer Park Ji-sung (Pak Chi-sŏng), and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (Pan Ki-mun) with images of cosmopolitan identity but instead tend to hail them as national heroes and to constantly identify them as Korean.

Although Korean society is in the grip of English-learning fever, an apparent marker of globalization, this phenomenon is ascribed to the local belief that English proficiency will provide better job prospects. Likewise, while Korea is arguably the global leader in Internet access and speed, it is ranked only sixtieth by the 2013 KOF Index of Globalization, which sorts countries by their global connectivity and interdependence in economic, social, technological, and cultural areas (KOF, 2013).⁴ Because Koreans widely hold the conception that dual citizenship is a social privilege, Tablo, who did not fulfill his military service, has been seen as unfairly advantaged. I, therefore, view the online harassment of

⁴ In a *New York Times* article on Korean culture, writer Jodi Kantor concludes that Korea "was still learning to tolerate and appreciate difference" (Feb. 7, 2014).

Tablo not merely as cyber bullying but rather as a hate crime that was directed by the politics of difference (Hall, 1996).

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton once stated that “hate crimes, committed solely because the victims have a different skin color or a different faith or are gays or lesbians, leave deep scars not only on the victims but on our larger community” (cited in Perry 2001, p. 7). To paraphrase, hate crimes against Tablo are an assault on Korean society. In a just and equal society, difference is not a source of victimization and marginalization, but instead functions as a basis for inclusion. Revisiting the Tablo case should encourage Koreans to rethink and re-embrace the values of coexistence and tolerance. Doing so is particularly necessary in this era, when Korea is making efforts to bind its growing multicultural elements into one union, after long years of monolithic discourse of nation that was developed as a means of national survival.

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