Introduction

On January 22, 2018, a message wishing South Korean President Moon Jae-in a happy birthday flickered on an electronic billboard in New York's Times Square. It was a few days later after the President's supporters displayed billboards in several Seoul subway stations and planned gatherings in multiple cities of South Korea, such as Seoul, Incheon, Daegu, Daejeon, Busan, and Jeju, to celebrate his first birthday since taking office (Lee, 2018; Persio, 2018). To join in on the celebration, Korean-Americans created a billboard in Times Square, which read: "Thank you for being our President; we are so blessed to have a President as splendid as you." A two-and-a-half minute video highlighted President Moon's political career and Korean-American supporters of all ages.

Unlike the domestic gatherings and billboards, which were rarely highlighted by any media, this peculiar billboard, a happy birthday wish to the South Korean President in one of the busiest places in New York City, drew tremendous attention. Fan-sponsored billboards to promote K-pop singers in Times Square were not uncommon, but a billboard of the Korean President was a first. Among the mixed reactions of excited approval and contemptuous disapproval, the response of the South Korean alt-right community, Ilbe, was remarkable: the community launched a billboard sign against the previous one in the exact same spot of Times Square within a week.

Highly developed digital media technology has altered our lives and experiences to various degrees. In the current digital era, as Castells (1996) notes, online communities are virtual and, at the same time, real. They are virtual in that they do not exist in physical spaces. People interact with others virtually; yet, these interactions among people can still be real. As people have come to depend heavily on digital media communication, such an obscure distinction between online and offline has become even more blurred than ever before. An example is the event above: it shows the process of how a digital confrontation between groups of different political perspectives has extended the ideological battlefield to offline space. With the case study of a South Korean online community, this research examines how people extend their online discourse to beyond the virtual community, and how they utilize offline venues to grow their base of supporters as a form of social movement. In particular, by highlighting the alt-right community's online interaction and offline activities, this study focuses on 1) how the Ilbe online community users facilitated online discussions in order to lead to offline social action; 2) why the Ilbe members created the advertisement in Times Square; and 3) what the implications are of the billboard within political and social contexts. In so doing, the researcher aims to clarify the meaning of space, both in digital and offline realms, in terms of influencing people's perceptions and mobilizing their social action to express their opinions.

The Alt-Right Community and Ilbe

The liberation of information has accounted for one of the most advantageous aspects of the Internet. Whereas people had been exposed to only limited amounts of news by the media before the Internet, anyone can obtain various types of information online. Yet, the accessibility of abundant information via the Internet has turned out to be a double-edged sword. People obtain not only diverse news perspectives, but also conspiracy theories and fake news (Barkun, 2003; Wilson, 2018). The introduction of incorrect and/or biased information has led readers to construct "alternative" realities. In particular, the audience for conspiracy theories has often tended to incorporate ideas of right-wing authoritarians (Altemeyer, 2004). Given that they have interacted with others who share similar worldviews and beliefs, and that they have

sustained significant parts of their social lives online, they have begun to create particular types of online communities; that is, alt-right groups.

The alt-right, short for "alternative right," refers to a far-right movement based online. The ideology of these alt-right groups can be summarized by white nationalism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and anti-multiculturalism (Lyons, 2017; Neiwert, 2017; Michael, 2017; Nagle, 2017). Many media scholars have begun to pay attention to the advent of the right-groups since the late 2000s. As their presence became prominent after the 2016 Presidential election in the United States (US), researchers have focused on political trolls and their motivations to participate in the online communities, and their tactics used (Coleman, 2014; Matias, 2016; Southern Poverty Law Center; 2016). Scholars have highlighted how several online communities, such as 4chan and 8chan, have become cyberplaces where members of alt-right groups can exercise their influence (Neiwert, 2017; Michael, 2017). Previous research has indicated the characteristics of alt-right groups as the following: a strong Internet presence accompanied with trolling; sophisticated use of digital technologies; and unique communication via utilizing memes. Moreover, judging by their trolling comments, alt-right group members' attitudes and worldviews towards their surroundings are often "highly ethnocentric, fearful of a dangerous world, aggressive, dogmatic, and inclined to extreme self-righteousness and poor reasoning" (Neiwert, 2017, p. 6). Combining the mindset to secure traditional values with their political inclination toward right-wing parties, alt-right groups' radical, political stances have been consolidated.

The emergence of alt-right groups has become a worldwide phenomenon. Research on such groups have been conducted not only in the US (Coleman, 2014; Matias, 2016; Neiwert, 2017), but also in European countries (Morstatter, Shao, Galstyan, & Karunasekera, 2018; Pirro, 2015). However, alt-right groups in East Asian countries have rarely been studied as of yet. Given the fact that many Asian countries have enjoyed highly developed digital media technology (for example, South Korea has been one of the most wired nations in the world), it is necessary to understand how alt-right groups in Asian countries have interacted with others, and how they have developed their online discourses. In this sense, the current research focuses on one of the alt-right groups in East Asian countries, Ilbe Storehouse in South Korea.

Ilbe Storehouse (henceforth, Ilbe), a representative alt-right community of South Korea, was launched in 2010. It was originally created in order to store the 'daily popular' posts of another popular online community, DC Inside. A sub-forum of DC Inside, 'daily popular,' displays only selected posts that are recognized by its users. Since having a post in the sub-forum was considered to be an honor, it soon led to severe competition among the community members of DC Inside. Its users tended to post problematic threads with ethically inappropriate, abusive memes to draw their peers' attention. Such overheated competition to create provocative posts resulted in the site administrator's need to censor posts in the daily popular forum and delete questionable posts. To prevent the removal of their recognized posts, DC Inside users created a 'storehouse' for saving their threads forever. This was the start of Ilbe Storehouse. Here, Ilbe is short for Ilgan Best, which is Korean for 'popular daily.'

Considering the motives of how the community was launched, it is not surprising that the use of memes has played a significant role for Ilbe. The more sensational the meme is, the more respect its author earns from other users. Indeed, the development of this online community is parallel with that of 4chan in the United States. Ilbe started as an open forum to share funny memes and witty posts. Similar to 4chan's original success with memes, which drew a million hits, several memes on Ilbe have been highly popular among its members. Ilbe also became

known for its trolling. Targets of Ilbe have mainly been ethnic and regional minorities, females, and figures in the liberal political party. Ilbe has been known as a representative alt-right online community since the 2012 Korean Presidential election.

Neiwert (2017) summarizes 4chan as "a world dominated by digital trolls, insanely unbridled conspiracism, angry White-male-identity victimization culture, and ultimately, open racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual/gender paranoia" (p. 4). The Ilbe community can be summarized with similar traits. Ilbe is a predominantly male-based online community. According to a self-initiated poll of 1,176 users in March 2013, 35 percent of all users are between the ages of 21 and 25 (Pearson, 2013). First, it is known for its hate speech against women. For example, one of the group's popular phrases, "kimchi bitch," refers to Korean women as gold diggers (Kasulis, 2017). Misogynistic posts have been one of the most popular topics in the community. Second, Ilbe users have shown strong hostility not only towards sexual minorities, but also ethnic minorities. They believe that there are certain groups of people who are superior to other groups in Korean society, that is, Korean men. They degrade anyone who may challenge their patriarchal authority. Third, the Ilbe community holds extreme right-wing political inclinations. Derived from their conservative political perspectives, the users refer to anyone who seems "pro-North Korea" or politically left as "commies" and denounce them with abusive memes and words.

Like 4chan, the Ilbe community is oftentimes a place where social norms, manners, and etiquette are considered as outdated hypocrisy, and its members focus only on trolling. Ilbe users have created several collages of various images, music themes, and words as memes. Some memes are borrowed from 4chan. Pepe the Frog is one of the most frequently used memes in the Ilbe community. In his analysis, Neiwert (2017) claims that alt-right groups utilize Pepe's meme not only because of the character's cuteness, but also because of its implication in a cultural context: irony. By using such memes, alt-right groups perceive themselves as "smarter and more sophisticated, [with] their rhetoric of racism, violence, and open eliminationism wrapped in more wit and humor, at least of a sort" (Neiwert, 2017, p. 9). Ilbe users have adopted both connotative and denotative meanings of several memes from 4chan. Additionally, they have created other images and ideas from the unique situation of South Korea. For example, they often mock the Gwangju Uprising (a mass protest against the South Korean military government in Gwangju between May 18 and 27, 1980), previous South Korean presidents from the liberal party, and North Korean leaders. The evolutionary process of Ilbe as an alt-right group is surprisingly similar to that of 4chan in the Unted States.

The Ilbe community has been able to exercise considerable influence over South Korean society, based on its large volume of users. According to a traffic analysis of the Ilbe community by SimilarWeb[1], it had 22.7 million visits and was the 24th most popular website in South Korea from January to June 2018. Whenever opinions are divided on particular issues, Ilbe has played a leading role in persuading the public to adopt right-wing perspectives. For example, the Ilbe community began to gain notoriety for its vocal support of the former President Park Geun-hye during her 2012 election campaign (Pearson, 2013). When she was impeached due to her political scandal and the liberal President Moon Jae-in was elected in March 2013, many older far-right supporters of Park decided to join the Ilbe community in order to "find solace in the bitter threads of Ilbe" (Kasulis, 2017). Although the far-rightists no longer have representation in the Blue house (the executive office and official residence of the

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[1] The traffic of the Ilbe community was estimated on March 2019 from
https://www.similarweb.com/website/ilbe.com.

South Korean President), the stance of the Ilbe community as an alt-right community has become more consolidated than before. In this sense, an examination of the community's online discourse and subsequent social movement outside the virtual space provides us with an understanding of the implications for how alt-right groups exercise their influence in society.

Public Space Itself Can Be a Symbolic Messenger

Lefebvre (2000) indicates that the globalization of capital has led to a shift from the production of commodities in space to the production of space itself. In particular, an "alternative calculus of use value" (Dirlik, 2001, p. 36) guides the projects of social change to appropriate abstract space and create meanings based on this space. There have been several studies on social movements and political actions related to public space. For example, Tiananmen Square was at the center of the May Fourth Movement (Lee, 2009); Boston for #Occupy Everywhere (Juris, 2012); and Taksim Square to save Gezi Park (Gül, Dee, and Cünük, 2014). Habermas (1996) notes that the public sphere, as "a network for communicating information and points-of-view" (p. 360) lies between the state and society. Here, physical space (Low & Smith, 2006) and media (Thompson, 2000) are some of the major components used to create the public sphere (Castells, 2008). With the advent of digital media technology, both the Internet and wireless communication networks have also become important factors (McChesney, 2007). Hence, when a cultural or political event happens within a physical space, and the mass media (including the Internet) distribute news to the public, space starts to be transformed as symbolic in nature.

People often plan social movements in the popular spots of a city in order to communicate the purpose of their actions in society: non-participants easily get to know what is going on and why it matters. Such movements can also quickly attract the media's attention. Most of the massive demonstrations in South Korea have been held in Gwanghwamun Square, one of the most popular tourist spots, as well as one of the busiest business districts of Seoul. Large groups of South Koreans have come together, holding candles in Gwanghwamun Square in order to express their opinions. Examples include the 2004 candlelight vigil that was held to protest the South Korean National Assembly's impeachment of President Roh, and the 2008 US beef protest, a series of demonstrations held after the South Korean government reversed a ban on US beef imports. Finally, there were the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils, in which more than a million people participated in a series of protests between October 2016 and March 2017 to urge for President Park's impeachment. On some occasions, South Korean diaspora members have also orchestrated multiple demonstrations and candlelight vigils related to the South Korean issues in their own cities, such as New York, Paris, London, and Los Angeles, to support their compatriots in South Korea. The worldwide 2016–2017 candlelight vigils serve as a representative example. Indeed, it is important to note that an individual social action has rarely been planned or taken outside the home country without any related local concurrence. Social actions inside and outside the country have occurred in tandem.

On the other hand, having billboard commercials is a different story in terms of promoting and advertising cultural products, including traditional customs, cities, and celebrities. Many South Korean-related commercials have been created and released external to South Korea, in particular, in New York City's Times Square. The first well-known case involved bibimbap commercials in 2010 and 2012. The South Korean publicist, Seo Kyoung-duk, and his team advertised bibimbap (a popular Korean dish made of steamed rice mixed with meat, vegetables and hot sauce) in a 60-second video (Chun, 2012). Since this commercial gained a great deal of attention from the media, diverse subsequent commercials followed. K-pop fans fund digital

billboards to promote their singers. According to a Forbes' article, such advertising has become "a full-scale, regularly occurring phenomena with fans from around the globe" to show their support, and 20–30 K-pop ad campaigns alone were displayed in Times Square in 2017 (Herman, 2017). One of the main reasons as to why people choose venues away from their own regions is the significance of the place as a public space. For example, Times Square is the most popular and expensive location in the United States for wide-scale ads. It is also one of the most well-known international tourist locations. Having an ad in such a place enables people not only to expect huge exposure to others who are not familiar with the topic, but also to deliver a meaningful message to the world. In this sense, a billboard in Times Square is understood as a way of sending a significant message to the world by its organizers and participants. It explains why fans are now more interested in having their ads in Times Square, even though similar ideas, such as purchasing ad space in subway stations, have been popular throughout Asia for years. Yet, it is still rare to find any such case related to politicians and political messages displayed in Times Square unless it is done for an election campaign. For this reason, when this unprecedented billboard appeared as a birthday wish for the South Korean President, its impact on the South Korean society was recognizable and worthy of study.

Research Questions and Methods

This research begins with the birthday ads for the South Korean President and the alt-right community's response to the commercial. The current President is not only a liberal party politician, but also is a close friend of the previously deceased President Roh, who was also a liberal party president. Fourteen months after finishing his term as president, Roh was suspected of bribery by prosecutors, and he committed suicide after saying that there were too many people suffering because of him. The Ilbe community has been notorious for its consecutive expression of hatred toward President Roh and its mockery of his suicide. Needless to say, its users have exhibited a hostile attitude toward the Moon administration. Within a week from the ad's release on January 22, 2018, the Ilbe community put up an impromptu billboard to countervail the previous ad in Times Square. By analyzing online discussions in the Ilbe community during the week of January 22, 2018 and the subsequent outcome (an impromptu billboard in Times Square), this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How did the Ilbe online community users facilitate online discussions in order to lead to offline social action?
2. Why did the Ilbe members create the advertisement in Times Square?
3. What are the implications of the billboard within political and social contexts?

The main research tool for this research is digital ethnography. Ethnography is a useful methodological tool used to explore complex links and to interpret culture (Geertz, 1973). Throughout a significant amount of time for observation and interaction, a researcher can provide a rich understanding and interpretation of what is going on within the field, and can decode the cultural meanings of a group's particular behavioral patterns, social customs, and norms.

With the advent of digital media, there have been trials to apply such a methodological approach to virtual communities. Digital ethnography can help researchers collect abundant amounts of data without moving from place to place. Despite its advantages, digital ethnography needs to be conducted carefully. Digital culture entails different types of social formation from the traditional, offline society (Hakken, 1999). This makes it difficult for researchers to find an appropriate site for research. It may also be hard to collect all of the

necessary data due to the features of digital communication – new information every minute; high user population volumes; and frequent changes in relevant topics. Given the features of digital communities, it is important for researchers to monitor online communities over a significant amount of time in order to analyze the online data in a timely and accurate manner (Sade-Beck, 2004; Jones, 1999). The researcher also needs to collect online data carefully because users can simply add, edit, or delete their messages. There is always the risk that only the active participants of the community are noticeable, who may not represent the majority of the group.

To maximize the benefits and to curtail the limitations of digital ethnography as a methodology, the current research has been tailored with respect to its research methods. After deciding on the Ilbe community as the research subject, the researcher endeavored to learn the specific jargons, memes, and issues that have been widely used in the community. Understanding the background and history of the Ilbe community in South Korean society enabled the researcher to capture the underlying contexts of online interactions within the community.

In order to encapsulate the consensus of the community, the researcher focused on one of the sub-forums in the Ilbe community entitled as "Ilbe." The Ilbe community has multiple sub-forums for politics, entertainment, anime, and celebrities, similar to 4chan. When a posting in any of Ilbe's forums receives a significant number of recommendations from other users, it moves to the "Ilbe" board automatically. It is considered as a special forum that has a higher rank than the other forums on Ilbe. Having a posting appear on the forum is thus considered as an honor among its users because it signifies widespread approval. Thus, this forum's postings indicate the topics and ideas that interest Ilbe users the most.

For this study, I collected all of the digital communication within the community from January 21, 2018, when news about the birthday wish billboard ad was first reported, to January 26, 2018, days after the Ilbe community's response ad was released and reported in South Korean media. Since the contents of the community is open to the public, I could easily access the threads and comments of the online community. According to Correll's (1995) typology of online community membership and participation, there are four different styles of participants: regulars, newbies, lurkers, and bashers. My observation style in the online community was close to that of a lurker. I did not participate in any activities or discussions in the community, but I did observe the users' interactions and activities. Since Ilbe is a representative alt-right community, it often promotes a one-sided perspective toward understanding social and political issues in South Korea. I tried to remain objective as a researcher in the process of collecting and analyzing the data from the community. I focused on the ways that Ilbe users developed their opinions as the dominant discourse within the community, and how they communicated these opinions to the outside community. There were approximately 250 postings associated with this topic on the board, and each posting included approximately 100 subsequent comments. Given that these comments represent how the Ilbe community members communicate and interact with one another, this research examines both the postings and the Ilbe community's subsequent comments.

This article consists of three analysis sections. First, the current research explores how the Ilbe online community confronted other groups with opposite political perspectives. This research also examines how the Ilbe community members initiated their ad event, how they responded to the pro-left-wing government advertisement, and how they developed their stance as an alt-right community to interpret the event. Second, this research demonstrates how the Ilbe community developed a relevant online discourse, turned it into social action, and justified the

action. Finally, the third section of this research elaborates the implications regarding the series of events and Times Square as the chosen venue for social action. It also articulates how public space plays a key role in delivering political messages to the public.

From Online Interaction to Digital War

The 2016–2017 South Korean political scandal that centered on President Park's relation with her old friend, Choi Soon-sil (in regard to abusing state power and leaks of classified information), has had a significant impact on South Koreans, both inside and outside South Korea (Lee, 2018). This massive social action not only resulted in President Park's impeachment, but also served as momentum for South Koreans to mobilize social change based on digital communication. Without the aid of digital media, the original idea of having candlelight vigils every Saturday afternoon to urge presidential impeachment would not have spread or continued for months. Digital media have even enabled South Korean diaspora members to join such movements. Overseas candlelight vigils in support of President Park's impeachment were orchestrated in 70 cities of 26 countries within a month (Im, 2017). As a result of witnessing the success of online-initiated social movements, South Koreans have actively used digital media to become involved in ongoing social and political issues.

South Korean netizens initially suggested the idea of putting up birthday-wish billboards as a way to show support for their new president on January 10, 2018 (Yoon, 2018). The original suggestion was to place ads in ten different subway stations in Seoul after fundraising the money for them. A day later, the users of Missyusa.com, a representative online community for South Korean American immigrant women, suggested launching a U.S. version of the ad in Times Square. In order to attract more people's attention, all of these processes, including raising money, creating a video clip, and contacting an advertising agency, were disclosed via online interaction – in particular Twitter. What is interesting here is that the Ilbe community rarely paid attention to news about these ads in the Seoul subway stations. Only four postings mentioned the ads. They complained about the project and laughed at the idea, but did not take the ads seriously at all. However, their nonchalant attitudes changed completely when they learned that South Korean American women were preparing to put up the ad in Times Square. Given the fact that President Moon has many female supporters and that the leading Twitter user names are feminine in nature, such as the Organic Wool Knitting Union[2], Ilbe's initial response postings and comments expressed hatred of women, then moved on to denounce the Moon administration. The Ilbe community members' threads before their response ad idea can be summarized as a mixture of misogyny, mockery of the left-wing president, and criticism of the current political situation in South Korea.

Many initial responses from Ilbe users targeted the project team. They belittled the participants of the project as "groupies" blindly following their idol. They did not see it as necessary to check on how many female participants were involved in the project. Assuming that women had created the project, their condemnation was aimed thoroughly at South Korean females.

> **2018.01.21**   21:33:34 We, 20s to 40s Korean males, need to be careful. We can see who supports the president and manipulates the media. The current government has been supported by these lunatics. There can't be any good policy made for men by this government.

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[2] The project participants created fake names to protect their private information.