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In the shadow of freedom of religion and the press

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Abstract

The Korean government's public health responses to the COVID-19 epidemic have achieved a remarkable outcome in terms of the measured number of infected patients and the overall mortality rate. Nonetheless, the public health authority's various mitigation strategies and vaccination efforts have faced several challenges primarily posed by politically motivated Christian fundamentalists and ultraconservative media's distorted news framing in Korea. This paper examines how these conservative forces – both religious and political – have undermined the Korean public health authority's various mitigation efforts and discusses how to address the problems from a public policy point of view. The paper argues that a comprehensive legal reform including the introduction of effective punitive damages in the media market is a necessary minimum to address some of these problems.

Keywords

COVID-19; non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs); Christian fundamentalism; ultraconservative mass media; fake news; punitive damages; South Korea;

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Introduction

The South Korean ('Korean' hereafter) government's public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely praised by many public health experts around the world. The government's rapid support for the development and deployment of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) testing kit and its timely implementation of extensive contact tracing to detect and suppress the spread of the virus have so far significantly contributed to mitigating the human, economic, and social cost of the pandemic (See below for the reference).

Nevertheless, the Korean public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and various administrative efforts to inoculate as many susceptible demographic groups as possible have been seriously challenged by many factors. These challenges include 1) Christian fundamentalists' non-civic obstruction and often violent resistance against the proposed public health measures, 2) ultraconservative mass media's biased and distorted news reporting, and, more importantly, 3) its unmitigated propagation via various commercial news portals and social network service outlets.

The goal of this paper is to analyze how various ultraconservative forces – both political and religious – have undermined the public health authority's mitigation efforts throughout multiple phases of the COVID-19 epidemic and discusses how to address some of the problems from a legal and public policy point of view. For this purpose, the paper proceeds with identifying three distinct phases of the COVID-19 epidemic and shows how ultraconservative forces have negatively affected the public health authority's mitigation efforts in each stage of the pandemic.

During each phase of the pandemic, conservative Christian fundamentalists and the opposition political party members aided by ultraconservative mass media have distorted the crucial information about the origin and spread of the novel coronavirus and have attempted to mobilize their forces to undermine the very credibility of the public health authority's various mitigation strategies. In order to better illustrate how their combined religious and political forces operate, this paper conducts a detailed textual analysis of their discourse. Utilizing several secondary texts compiled by civil society organizations, this paper analyzes the logic and sentiments behind Christian fundamentalists' political activism.

When it comes to the reporting practice of ultraconservative newspaper organizations, the paper also provides a brief historical and social background that helps better understand the overall ideological terrain in the Korean mass media market. The paper then discusses some legal reform proposals that may help enhance transparency and accountability in this biased mass media market. These legal reform proposals include, among others, the introduction and effective implementation of punitive damage clauses to penalize the intentional propagation of distorted fake news and to enhance the accountability of mass media organizations.

The analysis in this paper can show how ultraconservative Christian fundamentalists and biased mass media reporting practices have posed significant challenges to the public health authority's overall pandemic mitigation efforts by propagating various 'fake news'

including Sinophobia conspiracy narratives and false rumors about vaccine safety. This aspect of Korean society has been seldom highlighted by Western mass media, let alone academic researchers who are foreign to Korean society. Most of them have primarily focused on how effectively the Korean public health authority has achieved such a successful public health outcome, without paying due attention to the problems that the public health authority has to overcome. Therefore, the discussion in this paper can also shed light on some political economy aspects of contemporary Korean society, which may offer a useful comparative perspective of the relationship between the government (state) and civil society in the pandemic conjuncture.

Review of selected literature

The recent literature on the COVID-19 epidemic in Korea falls into the following two broad categories. The first one is to analyze how the Korean government and public health agencies have successfully managed the spread of the novel coronavirus. Many researchers have noted the importance of the Korean government's steady-fast testing, contact tracing, and treatment (quarantine) policies designed to suppress and mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus. For example, Kang et al. (2020), Oh et al. (2020), You (2020) all emphasize (1) the government's epidemic preparedness and early alert system, (2) the rapid development and massive deployment of diagnostic testing kits, and (3) the government's efforts to redesign and reallocate medical and clinical resources to detect, quarantine, and treat infected patients according to a series of clinical criteria. Kim and Castro (2020) also offers an early assessment of the effectiveness of these public policy measures (Kim & Castro 2020), and many journalistic reports on the Korean government's response to COVID-19 (Terhune et al., 2020; Parodi, 2020; Fisher & Choe, 2020; for example), as well as the Korean government's own accounts of the situation (The government of the Republic of Korea 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; KCDC, 2020) confirm to these observations.

Another strand of the literature is to conduct comparative statistical analyses of epidemic data. For example, Bertozzia et al. (2020) provides an early estimate of the COVID-19 pandemic using three different models for selected states in the US. Cooper et al. (2020) also conducted the SIR model-based parameter estimation for China, Korea, India, Australia, and selected states in the US using country-specific data from Dec. 2019 to July 2020. These papers show that a wide range of differences in infection and recovery rates among the country are primarily determined by the effectiveness of the government's non-pharmaceutical interventions.

These two groups of previous studies, however, tend to underestimate one crucial dimension that the complex trajectory of multiple phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea has shown so far, and it is the aspect of the Korean society that influences the way how the public health authority's proposed NPIs are perceived by the public and how various social forces affect and influence the public consensus about the legitimacy and credibility of the government's mitigation efforts. Both the statistical analysis of the effectiveness of the Korean government's pandemic response and the previous literature

on the administrative efficiency and effectiveness only show the aggregate outcome, while ignoring highly complex and contradictory processes of the implementation of the pandemic response.

This paper seeks to analyze this rather complex social aspect of the pandemic response in Korea, focusing on some of the significant challenges that the Korean public health authority has faced. In this sense, this paper is not an assessment of the effectiveness of the Korean public health authority's pandemic response, but rather an analysis of social and political arrangements, in which various ultraconservative forces interact with the liberal reformist government's pandemic mitigation efforts.

Material and methods of analysis

This paper begins with the basic information about the COVID-19 epidemic in Korea, and, for this purpose, we present selected epidemic data for Korea from late January of 2020 to late February of 2021. During this period, Korea experienced three distinctive stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, with each stage having a different immediate cause and propagation mechanism. The presented epidemic data is compiled from the official website of the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) (KDCA 2020).

The KDCA has released various epidemic data related to the novel coronavirus since the first imported infection case was confirmed. Individual researchers can view the daily press release and manually compile the data for the confirmed cases, recovered cases, deceased cases, all classified by sex, selected age group, and detailed geographical location of infection. These KDCA data series formed the basis for the internationally comparable dataset compiled by the Center for System Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University, which only takes the confirmed cases, recovered cases, and deceased cases (ignoring all other demographic and detailed geographic information) for international comparability. Since KDCA's press releases contain more detailed information about the COVID-19 epidemic, the paper uses the manually compiled KDCA dataset for this analysis.

One of the significant challenges that the Korean public health authority faced during the first two phases of the pandemic was non-civic and often violent resistance waged by various factions of Christian fundamentalists against the proposed mitigation measures. Armed with Sinophobia conspiracies, Christian fundamentalists' agitations and non-civic resistance often instigate a powerful anti-government and anti-science force that undermines the public health authority's pandemic mitigation efforts. As a way to illustrate how this politically motivated anti-government religious force negatively affects the pandemic mitigation strategies, the paper conducts a text analysis of their logic and slogans that leading factions of Christian fundamentalism frequently use to mobilize their religious-cum-political forces. The raw material for this text analysis comes from a series of selected newspaper articles and internal chats circulated among the members that are compiled by some reformist Christian civil society organizations.

There are many different characterizations of Christian fundamentalism. In the Korean context, fundamental Christianity is more than the theological belief on the

infallibility of the Bible and the accuracy of the biblical description. Rather, various Christian fundamentalist factions emerged and established their religious enterprises in response to traumatic historical experiences during the Korean War in the early 1950s. Most of the religious leaders were forced to emigrate from the North during the Korean War and became property-less immigrants in the South after the war. Some of them enriched themselves by preaching various forms of Messianic theologies, if not eschatology. With their religious power and influence over their Christian members, the fundamentalist leaders also played a crucial role in buttressing and supporting the long-lasting military dictatorships in Korea from the 1960s to 1980s. One immediate goal of this paper is to examine how some of these Christian fundamentalists responded to various COVID-19 mitigation efforts proposed by the Korean public health authority and how they perceive the situation themselves while attempting to sway the public opinion in their favor.

Another significant factor that has undermined the efficacy of the public health authority's mitigation strategies comes from ultraconservative media organizations and their various media outlets. Just as the historical origin of various Christian fundamentalist groups mentioned above, the Korean mass media market has its own unique historical and institutional characteristics. The Korean mass media market has been dominated by a few powerful ultraconservative newspaper organizations and their various business subsidiaries. Most of these oligopolistic news agencies grew and expanded their market share during the military dictatorships presiding over Korean society up until the 1980s. Even after the Korean society achieved its peaceful democratic transition in the late 1980s, ultraconservative news outlets continued to influence the public opinions. During the whole period of the COVID-19 pandemic, their biased news about the governmental efforts and performance and their systematic propagation of distorted information about the origin and spread of the novel coronavirus and about the vaccine safety have significantly undermined the public consensus about the health authority's mitigation efforts.

This paper seeks to analyze how the (mis-)information war waged by ultraconservative media forces has played out and, more specifically, how media framing and the ways in which these ultraconservative newspaper organizations and their commercial cable TV network have portrayed the government's mitigation efforts. For this purpose, the paper relies on various secondary sources that reveal their partial and biased reporting on the performance of the public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions and vaccination programs. This secondary source is primarily compiled by civil society media watchdogs and a few but important investigative journalist organizations.

The COVID-19 epidemic and public health responses in Korea

Let us briefly overview how the COVID-19 epidemic has played out in Korea and how the Korean public health authority has attempted to mitigate the spread of the virus. Up until the late February of 2021, there were three distinct stages of the pandemic in Korea. The Korean health authority detected the first imported case in late January of 2020, and the first full-blown spread of the novel coronavirus occurred from mid-to-late February.

According to KCDC, the immediate cause of this first wave was a massive religious rally held by a secretive Christian cult, known as Shinchonji Church of Jesus. The coronavirus easily spread among those who attended this religious gathering, which was held in a tightly packed mega-church building. The spike in the number of confirmed cases lasted until early May (May 10), when the new daily confirmed case fell below the weekly average of 50.

The second wave of the COVID-19 epidemic began in early August, as the number of confirmed cases rose sharply from a weekly average of less than 50 to a peak of 441 on August 28, 2020. The immediate trigger of this second spike was also directly related with another super spreader event that was more political in nature: A conservative opposition party allied with some Christian fundamentalist factions held a massive political demonstration at the center of the capital city, Seoul, calling for the immediate resignation of incumbent President Moon Jae-In. They claimed that the President was directly responsible for what they called ‘a catastrophic failure’ in stopping the spread of the ‘Wuhan virus.’

Unlike the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic, however, the public health authority was unable to implement proper healthcare measures such as enlisting and conducting preemptive diagnostic testing for suspected patients who participated in the political rally. Leading figures of this Christian fundamentalist movement not only opposed the health authority’s healthcare measures but also instructed their members not to cooperate with healthcare providers. Consequently, it took much longer for the Korean health authority to manage to bring down the number of infected patients below 100 (only by September 20, 2020), and it is not even clear whether the second wave was suppressed at all.

The third wave of the COVID-19 epidemic began around mid-October with daily confirmed cases rising from the low 60s to the peak of 1241 on December 25, 2020, which was the single highest number of daily confirmed cases in the entire period of the COVID-19 epidemic. Compared to the previous two waves, the latest phase of the infection dynamics did not seem to be associated with any single super spreader event. Instead, it stems from persistent small scale and multi-sited infection cases throughout the country, especially in childcare and elderly care facilities, private education buildings, and bars and restaurants, as well as in churches and other religious venues. The median age of newly confirmed patients was also lower than the second stage, as increasing numbers of younger and asymptomatic patients were suspected to spread virus variants that were likely to be more infectious and deadlier to some demographic groups.

Throughout the pandemic, the Korean public health authority led by the Central Disease Control and Management Headquarter has maintained and implemented consistent public healthcare measures. The health authority has adopted policies of (1) conducting preemptive and targeted diagnostic testing on a massive scale, (2) tracing epidemiological links of the confirmed patients, fully utilizing the information-communication technology-based infrastructure in the country, and (3) expanding both public and private medical facilities and equipment to accommodate the need of quarantining and treating different groups of patients in accordance with the severity of clinical symptoms. Taken together, these emergency disaster management programs

proved to be highly effective in lowering the number of infected patients and overall fatality rates (KCDC, 2020).

In addition to these non-pharmaceutical interventions, the Korean health authority began to implement its vaccination programs from mid-February of 2021. The authority's year-long non-pharmaceutical efforts have been supported by a nationwide vaccination program since then. The authority began inoculating first all medical personnel, soldiers, police and firefighters, school-teachers, and those who are residing in long-term elderly care facilities. As soon as the government obtained and imported a greater quantity of vaccine doses from abroad, the Korean health authority gradually relaxed the previous age and vocation restrictions placed on the vaccination qualification. Thanks to the government's carefully designed vaccination program and the broad-based public support, the Korean public health authority has been able to utilize its administrative capacity to fully vaccinate more than 80 percent of all eligible adults (about 40.5 million of the population) as of late November of 2021.

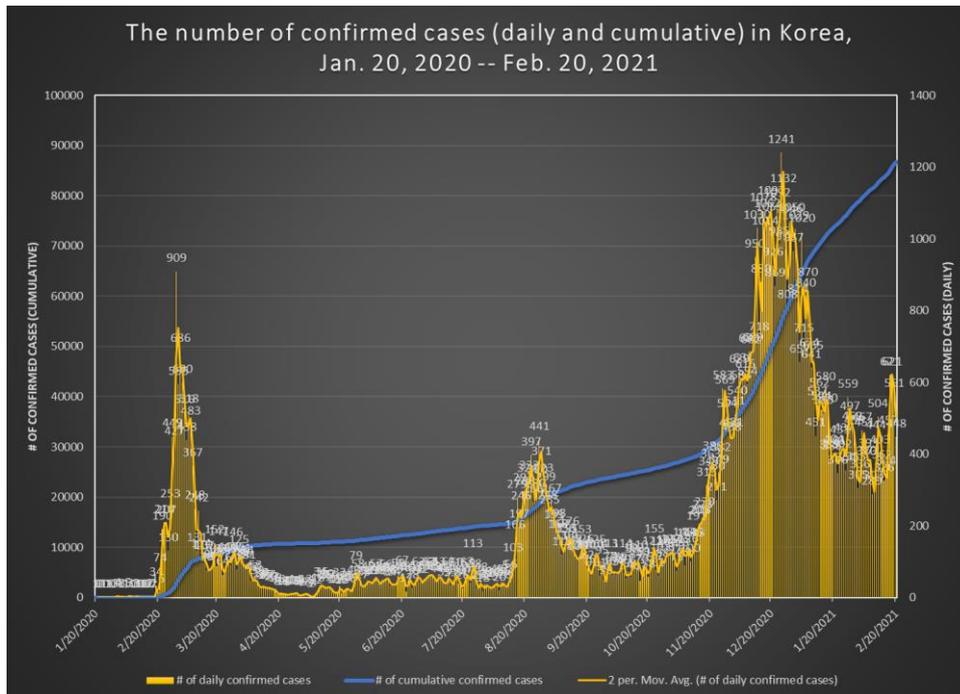


Figure 1. The number of confirmed cases (daily and cumulative) in Korea, January 20, 2020 - February 20, 2021

The following graphs show the selected epidemic data during the first three phases of the COVID-19 epidemic in Korea from late January of 2020 to late February of 2021². Specifically, Figure 1 shows the trajectory of infection and recovery, while Figure 2 shows the total number of cumulative deaths associated with the virus infection by selected sex and age groups.

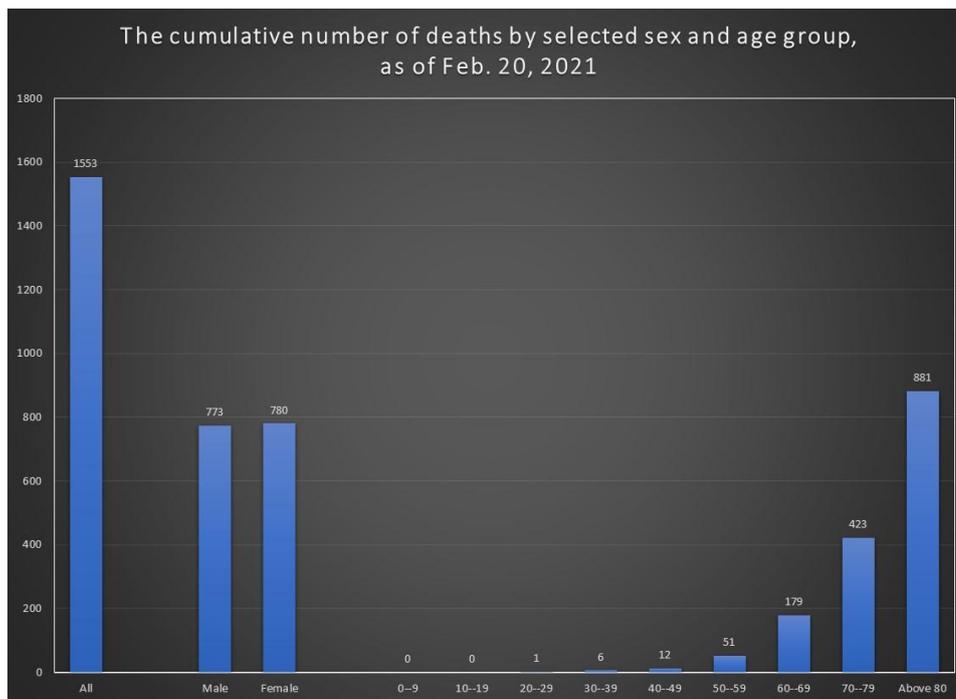


Figure 2 – The cumulative number of deaths by selected sex and age groups, as of February 20, 2021

Challenges and debates surrounding the government’s public health-care measures in Korea

The Korean public health authority’s relatively successful pandemic mitigation efforts, however, have not come without some significant challenges. In this paper, I would like to highlight the following three major problems: (1) The first challenge was right-wing Christian fundamentalists’ non-civic obstruction to the implementation of the public health authority’s mitigation measures. (2) The second problem comes from the way ultraconservative mass media has depicted the government’s mitigation efforts and how they have propagated either false or distorted information about the novel coronavirus and vaccine safety issue. The third challenge is associated with the unmitigated

² Starting from February 26, 2021, the Korean public health authority began administering the first dose of COVID-19 vaccines, putting the COVID-19 infection and recovery dynamics on a different trajectory. Therefore, this paper restricts the related epidemic data only for the period from January 20, 2020 to February 20, 2021.

propagation of ‘fake news’ through various social network outlets and news portals³. This section discusses how the Korean government and public health authority had to deal with these problems in more detail and examines some of the proposed legal reforms that may help address some of these problems.

a) Christian fundamentalists’ Sinophobia conspiracies and their non-civic obstruction

One of the biggest challenges to the Korean government’s public health measures comes from Christian fundamentalists’ obstruction of non-pharmaceutical interventions. Armed with various Sinophobia conspiracy narratives and their own right-wing political agenda, Christian fundamentalists fiercely resisted the public health authority’s various pandemic mitigation efforts and defended their non-civic and often violent obstructive behaviors in the name of ‘religious freedom.’

Early in the pandemic, some factions of Christian fundamentalists created a variety of conspiracy theories about the ‘true’ origin of the ‘Wuhan virus.’ According to some of their narratives, ‘the Communist Party in China artificially created the virus as part of its world domination tactic’. The Party ‘used the virus in Wuhan for their experiment’ and then ‘intentionally spread it worldwide by sending infected Chinese tourists to Europe and the US.’ Another conspiracy theory stated that the outbreak of the ‘Wuhan virus was God’s punishment for the communist oppression’ of their ‘Christian brothers and sisters’ residing in the Wuhan area (Shin, 2021; Kwon, 2020).

Based upon these stories, Christian fundamentalists quickly shifted their blame onto the incumbent Moon Jae-In’s government. They attacked the Moon administration’s ‘subservient’ foreign policy stance toward China and blamed the government for failing to adopt an immediate ban on Chinese tourists and suspension of all forms of international trade with Communist China. By allowing international flows of goods and people from China, goes the story, the Moon administration was actively collaborating with Communist tactics.

Christian fundamentalists’ Sinophobia conspiracy seemed to gain traction when ultraconservative factions of a powerful opposition party in the National Assembly joined forces and organized a violent demonstration at the center of Seoul on August 15, 2020. This super spreader event triggered the second wave of the COVID-19 that complicated the public health authority’s mitigation efforts. Unlike the first wave, the public health

³One may want to add some other factors such as the concern for privacy and surveillance issue associated with the government’s ICT-based contact tracing for COVID-19 patients to the list of these problems. For example, one superficial observer of Korean society blames the government’s contact tracing as ‘authoritarian’ and total ‘disregard’ of individual freedom and liberty (Cf. Xu and Lee, 2020). Others saw ‘the state’s class domination’ and power grab in the same pandemic mitigation effort (Baca, 2020). Opposition and blame-shifting waged by conservative political forces is another strong candidate for explaining the difficulty in implementing the public health measure more effectively. Early in the pandemic, one keen observer of Korean politics, for example, highlighted conservative opposition politics as one of the biggest threats to the stability of the government’s COVID-19 mitigation efforts (Park, 2020). This paper, however, is primarily focused on ultraconservative Christian fundamentalism and biased mass media and their negative effects on the government’s pandemic mitigation efforts. The rationale for this selection is provided below.

authority was unable to implement preemptive testing, contact tracing and quarantine of suspected patients. Highly politicized Christian fundamentalists who attended the rally fiercely opposed and even violently resisted the COVID-19 testing and self-quarantine measures. Not only did they resist to provide a full list of rally organizers and participants, but they also specifically instructed their loyal members to not cooperate with healthcare officials. Because of this non-civic and often violent resistance, various public healthcare measures were either not implemented thoroughly or delayed substantially. The original plan for opening schools and campuses for the fall semester was indefinitely postponed because of this sequence of events, and the government's plan to resume the operation of museums, libraries, and other public facilities was also delayed consequently.

Many influential leaders from other Christian factions and different religions criticized this group of Christian fundamentalists. Public opinion became also highly critical of their hypocritical abuse of religious freedom (Danbinews, 2020). Some netizens even invented a new derogatory word 'Gae-Dokgyo' (개독교 in Korean), a combination of 'Gae' = (shitty) dog and 'Kie-Dokgyo' = Christianity, meaning '(shitty) dog-like, damning Christians.' Moreover, one investigative reporter of this highly politicized Christian movement alleged that the primary motive underlying their anti-government rally was to defeat and reverse the Moon administration's legal reforms governing churches and religious practice. One of these reform agendas was to introduce and impose a payroll tax and reasonable income tax rate on revenues millionaire pastors and mega churches have earned (MBC, 2020a). If this allegation is true, what lies behind all conspiracy narratives and their non-civic obstruction often defended in the name of religious freedom is nothing more than a militant pursuit of pure material interest at the expense of public health and safety.

The public's anger and increasingly negative perceptions about the anti-science and anti-government agitation notwithstanding, a few leading conservative churches and religious communities under their influence have never stopped spreading false rumors and their conspiracy narratives. They have continued to blame proposed public health measures (i.e., social distancing rule) for seriously infringing their Christian religious freedom and practice: 'A genuine and sincere Christian should attend the church ceremony (physically to pay a tithe),' Or 'online ceremony is no substitute for physical attendance at the house of God (meaning their mega-church buildings to pay weekly and seasonal offering),' they say. 'Jesus is my vaccine and my only cure,' 'COVID-19 vaccines will manipulate your DNA and enslave all Christians,' they contend. Their conspiracy narratives never end without blaming what they claim the 'leftist government' for almost everything. The Moon administration is 'stifling Christian conscience and religious freedom,' as a puppet of the Communist Party in China (and North Korea) (Shin, 2021; Kang, 2021).

b) Biased mass-media coverage and distorted information about the government's mitigation efforts

Public opinion about the performance and effectiveness of the government's public healthcare measures has been also affected by how the mainstream media portray the governmental efforts and how their reporting is disseminated through various media outlets. In this respect, the Korean experience also demonstrates how difficult it is to preserve and protect freedom of the press while holding biased conservative mass media accountable.

Historically, the Korean mass media market has been dominated by a few ultraconservative newspaper organizations. Some of these newspaper companies grew and expanded their market share during the long-lasting military dictatorship presiding over the entire Korean society from 1960s to 1980s. Even as Korean society worked to purge its residual authoritarian legacy in the late 1980s in many social spheres through sustained grass-roots democratic movements, the authoritarian power of ultraconservative news outlets to influence public opinion remains untouched (Han, 2020).

More recently, under the two consecutive conservative administrations of Lee Myung-Bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-Hye (2013-2017), right-wing newspaper organizations headed by *Chosun Ilbo* and *DongA Ilbo* acquired illicit licenses to establish their own commercial cable TV broadcasting channels, *TV Chosun* and *Channel A*, respectively (Choi & Jung 2012). Many media specialists and progressive media watchdogs in civil society have long highlighted the Lee Myung-Bak government's preferential treatment of these two TV cable channels and have thus advocated for strict regulations on their operations that have propagated extremely biased and distorted news and commercial contents (CCDM, 2017b; 2017c).

The public pressure for revoking the cable TV broadcasting license was intensified when the former President Park Geun-Hye was finally impeached and removed by the Korean Constitutional Court after more than half-year long candlelight vigils and peaceful but powerful protest over her corruption scandal and gross negligence (CCDM, 2017a). A former human right lawyer Moon Jae-In was elected in the emergent presidential election that immediately followed this impeachment event. Even though the Moon administration and his reformist governing party, the Democratic Party of Korea, put forth a series of media reform agendas, the right-wing media moguls used their over-sized market power and political connections with ultraconservative opposition parties to thwart the Democratic Party's legislative effort. Taking advantage of their dominance in the mass media market to influence public opinion and thereby, to influence congressional legislation, they have systematically undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the Moon administration's various reformist policy agenda.

The right-wing media assault on the Moon administration intensified with the advent of the COVID-19 epidemic. Both *Chosun Ilbo* and *DongA Ilbo* and their commercial cable TV outlets amplified the conspiracy narratives of the 'Wuhan virus' and false claims about the government's foreign-policy subservience to China. They also called for an immediate ban on the entry of all Chinese nationals, echoing the Sinophobia and racist

mantra of the former U.S. President Donald Trump who shifted total blame to the Chinese for the global spread of the virus.

It is uncertain to what extent this conservative media framing and misinformation has negatively affected the public's perception about the government's mitigation efforts and the risk associated with the novel coronavirus. According to one early study conducted based upon an online survey indicates that a certain media framing and misinformation can increase fear of infection, anxiety, and prejudice against infected people, which is detrimental to the public health authority's various mitigation efforts (Lee, Lee & Park et al., 2020).

The public health authority's 3T (testing, tracing, and treatment) strategies achieved a remarkable performance in suppressing and mitigating the COVID-19 epidemic during the first wave. Compared to many other countries, both the number of infected patients and those who died of the infectious disease were pushed down to a manageable level. Consequently, the approval rating for the governing party and public support for the health authority's mitigation efforts soared, which ultimately gave a landslide victory for the governing Democratic Party in the legislative election (held on April 15, 2020) (Jo & Chang, 2020). The government's effective mitigation strategies also gained a wide range of international attention and recognition (Dighe, Cattarino & Cuomo-Dannenburg et al., 2020; Fisher & Choe, 2020).

Nonetheless, the misinformation campaign by ultraconservative news outlets continued unabated. In their telling, the success in taming the spread of the virus was due, in part, to *'a little bit of luck'* and to the remarkable efforts spearheaded by the KCDC leadership. What was conveniently ignored in this story is that the KCDC is a government agency under the Ministry of Health and Welfare whose annual and supplemental budget was fully restored from the low level that the previous two conservative administrations made by their budget cuts and successively increased under the incumbent Moon administration. More importantly, the KCDC was upgraded to a new independent disease control and prevention agency – the KDCA (Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency) – commanding more budgetary support and policy autonomy under this administration.

For decades, ultraconservative news organizations have been propagating maliciously distorted and selective information as if they constitute legitimate *'news.'* Fierce right-wing propaganda, often justified in the name of *'diversity of world views'*, has been systematically infiltrated through various mass-media platforms and have seriously challenged every meaningful social policy reform. Deriding and ridiculing these conservative journalists' biased reporting practices, many young Korean netizens have coined the word *'Gie-Raegie'* (기레기 in Korean). The word comes from a combination of Gie-Ja (journalists) and Sseu-raegie (*'trash or garbage'*), meaning *'trash journalists'* or *'garbage-like journalism.'* Despite the public's increasingly skeptical view about the quality of news and media contents, there is no shortage of Gie-Raegies inventing and propagating various fake news, poisoning the national conversation with hyperbolic misinformation and dangerous disinformation.

Occasionally, these trash journalists encounter serious criticisms and public pressures. Whenever these happen, Gie-Raegies always defend their practice in the name of freedom of press and expression. Just as politically motivated Gae-Dokgyo disciples attempt to justify their anti-science and racist Sinophobia in the name of God and religious freedom, Gie-Raegies have defended their dangerous disinformation campaigns with the constitutional right of freedom of the press. Both freedoms of religion and freedom of the press, two important constitutional values, are frequently abused in this way in the contemporary Korean society.

c) The propagation of ‘fake news’ through news portals and various social network services

Another important channel through which some of these ‘garbage-like’ news are disseminated is a search engine-based news portal provided by two major web search engine service companies, *Naver.com* and *Daum.net* operating in Korea. Unlike *Google.com* or *Yahoo.com*, Korean web search engine service providers have exercised their exclusive power to maintain their online newsstand through algorithms, in which all sources of newspaper articles and TV channel’s media contents are collected, screened, and disseminated to the public. Many smartphone users in Korea are accustomed to access to various news and media content via these online news portals.

The problem is that the commercial motive and ideological bias of these online portals determines what passes for ‘national news.’ The national news screened in this way, of course, are tainted by political and commercial interests of the two major news portal service providers. Quite recently, investigative journalists have found that the algorithms designed and used by *Naver* and *Daum* are not ‘objective’ as they have claimed, but instead have exhibited an extreme bias in favor of ultraconservative media contents. Smartphone users are increasingly exposed to these conservative, biased, and even baseless critiques of the government’s mitigation efforts stemming from ultraconservative news organizations longer and more frequently through these outlets. Even if one picky smartphone user intentionally chooses selective progressive newspaper articles, somehow their algorithms ‘objectively’ provide a series of news reporting full of ultraconservative contents that often denounce the government’s performance in the COVID-19 mitigation efforts and frequently exaggerate administrative mistakes committed by the public health authority (MBC, 2020b, 2021a).

Ultraconservative ideologues also amplify their message through a variety of social network services (SNS) that they operate such as in personal *YouTube* channels and the group chatting services provided by *KakaoTalk*. These SNS channels were central to the political mobilization initiated by Christian fundamentalists during and after the second wave and to the radicalization of their supporters through the amplification of conspiracy theories and misinformation about government policies. It seems that some subscribers to these SNS channels have reinforced their biased worldview and ultraconservative conspiracies to the extreme, so that they often committed extremely anti-social and violent behaviors confronting the government’s public health measures (Cf. CCDM, 2020).

Perhaps it is under these hostile and debasing media environments that the credibility of the public health authority's various mitigation efforts and administrative plans for the COVID-19 vaccination has been seriously undermined. The Korean government began to formulate and prepare for the nationwide COVID-19 vaccination program in late 2020 and began administering its phased vaccinations in the late February of 2021. The Korean public health authority did not feel it urgently necessary to buy up scarce and expensive COVID-19 vaccine candidates at first, partly because of its early success in suppressing and mitigating the virus through its effective non-pharmaceutical interventions. The public health officials also maintained a very cautious attitude toward the emergency use of vaccine candidates because they wanted to verify the safety and potential side effects associated with the full vaccination drive. Therefore, the Korean public health authority maintained a policy of carefully watching and monitoring the public health situation in other countries (notably the case in the US and UK). This cautious policy stance toward monitoring potentially hazardous effects of various vaccine candidates and lengthy negotiations with major global COVID-19 vaccine developers were justified given the government's remarkable success in prior non-pharmaceutical interventions⁴.

Not unexpectedly, this minor delay in the implementation of the vaccination program was met with hyperbolic attacks by ultraconservative mass media apparatuses. Using their outsized online voice, they took the opportunity to condemn and demonize the Moon administration's *'irresponsible', 'haphazard'* policy stance in the *'global vaccine competition.'* At these online sites, the government's careful and deliberate actions were portrayed as total administrative failures. *'Korea,'* it was argued, *'lost again in the global vaccine war'* because of *'the incompetence of the Moon administration,'* which completely failed to cope with the *'Wuhan virus'* in the first place and *'indulged in international praises of so-called K-quarantine,'* all the while wasting precious time to secure vaccines⁵.

⁴ The Korean public health authority began its COVID-19 vaccination on February 26, 2021, with a set of priorities. The first dose of vaccine was administered to all health care service workers and patients in convalescent hospitals, mental health care facilities and rehab centers (doctors, nurses, social service workers, and long-term patients) and frontline medical workers (those who are working at COVID-19 testing sites and evaluation labs) on the first day, and the vaccination eligibility has been gradually expanded according to ages (those who are 75 years old and older followed by the age group for 60-74), existing health conditions, and social importance of occupations (educators and service workers at childcare facilities, teachers and educators in schools, police, firefighters, military personnel, airline workers, etc.). There has been no serious case of 'vaccine inequity problem' or discrimination in vaccination based upon the residency (regional disparity), gender and income level in Korea (Jung, Jaehun, 2021). This is a stark contrast to a wide range of income-related, gender-related, race and ethnicity-based, and region-based discrimination and disparities in vaccinations observed in the U.S.

⁵ One can easily detect what is missing in this media framing: The scarcity of vaccines and global disparity in vaccination that has severely constrained the government's ability to obtain and administer vaccinations. As of writing, the global disparity in COVID-19 vaccine access is not fully addressed (WHO, 2021). The highest share of the total population that received at least one vaccine dose is largely concentrated in North America and Europe with the biggest beneficiaries being the UK, US, Canada, Germany, France (Our World in Data, 2021). The geographic concentration and inequity of COVID-19 vaccination are largely determined by the intellectual property restrictions imposed by transnational mega pharmaceutical companies, rich countries' 'vaccine nationalism,' and the individual government's financial ability and bargaining power to

Even after the government's repeated assurances that it had successfully secured enough quantity of vaccines for herd immunity and it had a sufficient administrative capacity for initiating its vaccination program guided by a clear set of priorities, the hostile media attack did not subside. Now the same news media organizations began to exaggerate side effects associated with a particular vaccine. *'The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine that the administration obtained is laden with so many unknown side effects,' 'The administration has hurriedly signed a deal to buy the cheapest vaccine without paying due attention to the potential side effects,'* they say. When a few incidents of side effects were reported in early March, they were portrayed as lethal and unmanageable by conservative media outlets (Kim Go-Eun, 2021; CCDM, 2021; MBC, 2021b).

The extent to which public perception about vaccine safety has been influenced by these systematic and malicious attacks is uncertain. However, one survey conducted by a private opinion poll company, Korea Research, finds that the willingness to get a COVID-19 vaccine shot has steadily declined over a year. The first survey conducted in late July of 2020 indicated that about 87% of participants were willing to get any COVID-19 vaccine as prescribed and administered by the public health authority. But this number fell to a mere 67% during the first week of January 2021 when malicious attacks and a systematically organized misinformation campaign ramped up against the government. To counter the *'fake news'* and explain the government's assurance policy for vaccine safety, the public health authority had to divert its scarce resources (their time and energy) away from the actual COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Perhaps due to this concerted effort and information campaigns, the percentage of those who indicated a willingness to get the vaccine rose to 74% as of early March of 2021. However, the same percentage has never reached back to its previous peak of 87% so far (Korea Research, 2021: 4)⁶.

As this example illustrates, the power of ultraconservative news organizations to shape public opinion is not insignificant. By controlling the national conversation through their dominance over various mass-media platforms, ultraconservative news organizations

obtain vaccines. Even though the Biden administration once proposed to ease the vaccine-related intellectual property restrictions, it did not lift a ban placed on the COVID-19 vaccine export. This geopolitical restriction and global political economy aspect of vaccine access is a crucial issue that needs to be addressed whenever one attempts to evaluate the performance of an individual government's vaccination efforts. However, nowhere in ultraconservative Korean mass media can we find relevant information about this global vaccine inequity issue and how to address this problem.

⁶ As indicated earlier, the Korean public health authority has achieved another remarkable success in the overall vaccination rate record. The Korean public health authority has ramped up its vaccination drive in full force beginning from late April of 2021 after successfully inoculating the first prioritized social group. Since then, the full vaccination rate reached more than 80% of all eligible adult population as of late November, which is by far the highest vaccination rate among OECD countries with more than 50 million of population size. This highest record of the vaccination rate is achieved in less than 8 months period. How the Korean public health authority has managed to inoculate such a greater proportion of the population in such a short period of time, even in the face of various anti-vaccine and anti-science forces would require a separate study.

have demonstrated their power to undermine and seriously challenge the Korean government's year-long COVID-19 mitigation efforts and vaccination programs.

d) Debates over proper legal reforms for enhancing media accountability

During the first wave, one keen observer of Korean politics argued that both conservative politicians and Christian fundamentalists were the biggest threats to the government's efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 (Park, 2020). Probably this author did not have enough space to add those ultraconservative news organizations and their whole media apparatuses also played a crucial role in fueling the anti-science and anti-government sentiment.

Many progressive lawmakers and civil society organizations have long called for introducing comprehensive legal reforms to level the tilted media market and to enhance the accountability of conservative mass media outlets. This reform proposal includes: (1) Strengthening the existing Korea Communications Commission (KCC)'s oversights over the contents of public broadcast and cable TV channels, including the investigation and imposition of sanctions against violations committed by broadcasting and/or communications business operators and preventing the circulation of illegal or harmful information; (2) Empowering the existing Press Arbitration Commission (PAC) to reinforce its mediation and arbitration authority, including punitive damages for Gie-Raegies' production and dissemination of fake news; (3) Introducing punitive damages system in the media market to prevent and sanction dissemination of fake news, including ones circulating in YouTube channels and other SNS platforms; (4) Enhancing transparency and democratic governance in major arbitration and deliberation process by allowing wide range of civil participation and observations, including the mandatory regular publication of white papers on the matter and easy public access to documented results.

Most of these reform agendas have been proposed by many civil society media watchdogs for a long time (See, for example, CCDM, 2017b, PCMR, 2017), and there is nothing radical in this modest reform proposal from their point of view. Nonetheless, some conservative critics say that the proposed media reform bills will severely undermine freedom of the press and, in the worst case, can be used to seize and control mass media by the 'leftist government.' Many progressives, on the other hand, the proposed bills have so many loopholes that the already established mega-media corporations can easily exploit. They also argue that the cap placed upon the maximum amount of monetary compensation associated with the punitive damage clause is not enough to sanction and prevent damaging media contents emanating from ultraconservative newspapers and their cable TV outlets (Jung Chul-Eun, 2021; Kim Young-Hwa, 2021). Whether this modest legal reform and related efforts to bring a balance in the mass media environment in Korea would achieve any meaningful progress remain to be seen. Until then, however, the systematic manipulation of public opinion waged by a whole array of ultraconservative media outlets will continue to be operating as a dominant force in Korean politics and society alike.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to analyze some of the significant challenges facing the Korean government's efforts to suppress and mitigate the COVID-19 epidemic and discusses how to address these problems from a legal and public policy point of view. Even though the public health authority's non-pharmaceutical interventions have achieved a remarkable outcome in dealing with the epidemic in Korea, many conservative forces – both political and religious – have negatively affected the public perception about the government's mitigation efforts, and, more importantly, ultraconservative media's biased campaigns against the government's health-care measures have engendered a serious difficulty in maintaining the broad-based public support. Whether the Korean society will be able to address these chronic social problems, while successfully overcoming the immediate health emergency remains to be seen.

One may argue that the Korean pandemic experience is not that severe, especially compared to the American experience under the Trump administration. The administration's initial denial and gross negligence of the danger of the COVID-19, its repeated failures in formulating and implementing consistent COVID-19 mitigation strategies, its political mobilization of ultraconservative forces (White supremacists and Christian fundamentalists) to win the election, and its unabated stronghold in many states and regions in the U.S. even after the 2020 presidential election has shown the extent to which ultraconservative political forces can destroy the society in the pandemic conjuncture. Even though the gravity may not be the same, ultraconservative forces that produce and propagate unlimited fake news and anti-science and anti-government sentiment has been one of the biggest threats to the Korean government's pandemic mitigation efforts.

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