

## **Japanese Social Media & The Rise of Nativist Extremism**

The rise of social media sites around the world has paralleled branches of modern right-wing extremism. Activists and ideological extremists are increasingly using social media to proselytize [REDACTED]. Studies show that social media drives radicalization at an alarming rate with social media playing a role in the radicalization process of nearly ninety percent of known extremists. Additionally, the average time frame for a person first seeing extremist content to reach a state of radicalization has decreased from approximately eighteen months to only thirteen (Jensen & James, 2018). [REDACTED] Right-wing groups in Japan, called *uyoku dantai* (右翼団体), have existed for centuries. Recent groups have taken to the web where they have garnered the name *netto-uyoku* (ネット右翼), literally “net right-wing” but most commonly translated as “internet rightist” (Asahina, 2019). It must be noted, however, that right-wing groups in Japan are non-analogous to their Western counterparts. Historically, the dominant Japanese conservative parties have been pro-establishment with minimal focus on racial policies. Only in the last few decades have these groups fostered nativist ideologies and xenophobic policy reforms (Higuchi, 2020). I propose this transformation is a result of Western influences imported via social media, [REDACTED]

One example of a *netto-uyoku* group, who I will be using as an example case study, is the Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of Koreans (在日特権を許さない市民の会), commonly referred to as *Zaitokukai* (在特会). The name stems from the term *zainichi* (在日) which most literally means “resident of Japan”, but colloquial usage has come to refer specifically to ethnic Koreans whose ancestors immigrated to Japan prior to the end of World War II in 1945. Although Korean *zainichi* are the primary focus of the group, the *Zaitokukai* also oppose other East Asian immigrants and promote broad nativist policies (Asahina, 2019).

Founded in 2007, *Zaitokukai*’s membership has grown in excess of 16,000 (Asahina, 2019). Following the 2015 physical assault of a counter-protester by their founder, Makoto Sakurai, however, enrollments have stagnated. New memberships have dropped to under a hundred per year, and the website has not been updated since mid-2017 (Higuchi, 2020). Nonetheless, the group is one of the largest, most influential far-right organizations, and for our purposes can be considered structurally and ideologically representative of *uyoku dantai* (Asahina, 2019).

The defining characteristic of social media is its network structure. Through a complex web of peer-to-peer connections, false information and radical opinions can easily spread over vast physical

and culture distances. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] and effectively “infect” any given social sphere within the network.

Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media reinforces social learning behaviors [REDACTED]. Much discussion has been made on the observed social and political homophily of online groups, and this so called “echo chamber” is often reported as the driving force of extremism. A study presented at the 2019 International Conference on Web Intelligence found that users with moderate political views posted less often and shared favorite content less often than those on either the far-left or far-right extremes of the political spectrum (Zeyu). This combination of factors means that as individuals progress through the stages of radicalization, the opportunities for the individual to interact with opposing, counter-radicalizing viewpoints become increasingly infrequent.

What distinguishes social media from other venues of repetitive messaging, however, is the interactivity. Unlike earlier media forms, such as television or talk radio, the internet is an interactive medium wherein users take an active role in construction and reproduction of group rhetoric (Asahina, 2019). The public nature ensures members of a group conform to the ideals. The group rewards users (through likes, comments, follows, etc.) for being a “good” member and punishes users (dislikes, negative comments, and temporary or permanent bans) when his or her activities conflict with group ideology (Das, 2014). The social feedback loop creates a system that drives members into more extremist positions. Many Zaitokukai members, for example, reported initially only having feelings of animosity towards a single country, but after becoming more involved they developed active resentment towards many foreign groups (Asahina, 2019). [REDACTED]

The internet has also created a new concept of “public anonymity.” This means that although an individual’s online activity is public, his or her real-world identity remains unknown. As a result, a person can gain social approval from extremist groups while avoiding real-life repercussions. In Japan, about seventy-five percent of Twitter profiles lack easily identifiable personal information (Takikawa).

Social media is an incredibly powerful tool in recruiting and radicalization, surpassing traditional

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<sup>1</sup> News reported dubbed it the “Calderon Affair” given the Filipino victims’ family name, Calderon.

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