

Media for Migrants and by Migrants: Migrant Workers Television in South Korea

Sometimes the Immigration Bureau contacts us, wanting to know if any of our presenters are illegal migrants and the like. They try to pressure us. But all the same, I think they know they can't go too far. They're a bit afraid of us too, because we are the media.¹

If a passerby had unknowingly stumbled into the 'Hanyang Hof', a large German-style beer house in central Seoul, on Saturday April 26, 2008, she would have been greeted by the sight of a birthday celebration in full swing. Aside from the typical trappings of flowing beer, birthday cakes and streamers, she would quickly realize that this was indeed a unique collection of celebrators gathered in the heart of what is still a largely homogeneous nation. Immediately her attention would be drawn to the Tibetan performer on stage, draped in a large Tibetan flag and singing an ode to his turmoil stricken homeland. She would then hear a Bangladeshi man enthusiastically greeting the end of the song with a cry of "No Beijing Olympics!" - a statement that is politely ignored by the table of Chinese and Korean-Chinese revelers seated to his left. Filming the performance with twin Sony PD 170 cameras, this now somewhat confused passerby would take note of Ashok, a migrant worker from Nepal, and Aungtintun, a Burmese asylum seeker. She might wonder what these south Asian migrants are doing here, behind an expensive TV camera instead of behind a drill press in one of Korea's dreary factory districts. Perhaps after a few minutes someone would invite our puzzled passerby to sit down. She would probably then learn that she had happened upon the 3rd anniversary party for "Migrant Workers Television." After celebrating with her new friends into the early morning hours, she would likely come away from this experience wanting to know more. Who is this group of multi-ethnic media activists and why are they making TV programs for migrant workers in South Korea?

This paper is an attempt to understand the emergence and ongoing development of Migrant Workers Television (hereafter MWTV) within a rapidly changing society. Unlike mainstream versions of 'multicultural' broadcasting, MWTV is television made both for and by members of the migrant worker community. In fact, the core founders of MWTV include undocumented migrants, who run the gauntlet of South Korea's Immigration Bureau even as they make and broadcast their programs. MWTV is clearly a dynamic example of 'alternative media'. However, MWTV also

¹ AsiaRights Journal, Issue 6, 2006, from <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal/>, accessed on May 28, 2008.

exhibits a number of characteristics that make it a unique case study in alternative media - the most obvious being that it is an independent and critical voice that - to date - has relied largely on government funding. However, under Korea's new conservative government and the hegemonic discourse of 'multiculturalism', MWTV is being forced to find new ways to survive and to maintain its presence as a voice for, and by, migrant workers. This paper will conclude by arguing that even as MWTV's response to top-down multiculturalism is being negotiated, an authentic, grassroots experiment in cross-cultural "citizens' media", and everyday multiculturalism, is well-underway.

The Emergence of MWTV: Convergence of the Migrant Movement and the Alternative Media Movement

The Arrival of Migrant Workers in South Korea

To understand the emergence of MWTV, it is necessary to gain some background knowledge on the relatively brief, but explosive, history of migrant workers in South Korea (hereafter 'Korea'). Migrant workers first started to appear in Korea after the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. Korea's economy by this time had experienced two decades of rapid industrial growth and pronounced labor shortages were beginning to occur in some sectors. Migrants took over in the jobs that young Koreans were shunning – the so-called 3D jobs (Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult). At first most worked without papers, making them easy prey for exploitation. The subsequent 'Trainee System'² that the government enacted did little to improve conditions.

Migrants were paid substantially less than Koreans for the same work and as they were considered 'trainees' not 'legitimate' workers they were not protected by labor rights. To address this rampant exploitation, many migrant supporting NGOs began to emerge within Korea's civil society. Korea's civil society had greatly diversified by the 1990s (after the watershed event of the 1987 democratization struggle), and new social movements were branching out from an overt focus on political reform to include issues such as the environment, gender and human rights.³ It was within this context that the migrant worker's movement was based.

Korea's Alternative Media Movement

² The Trainee System was eventually phased out in 2007, and replaced entirely by the Employment Permit System (EPS), which first came into effect in 2004.

³ As well, the government of President Kim Young Sam (1992-1997), in an effort to reform the authoritarian system inherited from previous administrations, began to provide grants to non-profit organizations and aid agencies. This support of civil society continued under the liberal governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun.

The film and documentary movement of the 1980s was an important vehicle for both the democracy movement in general and the labor movement in particular. After 1987, radical video documentaries continued to be produced, relying on independent production and distribution. Growing in scope and impact through the 1990s, the movement was led by a new generation of video activists. In the late 1990s, a few remarkable institutional changes buttressed the movement. The first was the creation of the Korean Independent Film Association; followed by the establishment of the media education center 'MediAct' and the public access TV station 'RTV'. MediAct opened its doors in May, 2002. MediAct provides educational facilities and rents film production equipment to independent filmmakers at low rates. MediAct also offers media education programs and helps citizens to produce their own films and media productions. RTV was founded in September 2002 as a public access channel of Korean Digital Satellite broadcasting (Skylife). Created in order to give citizen's broadcasting rights, part of RTV's mandate is to serve socially disadvantaged or minority populations in Korea and to guarantee media access for minority or disadvantaged peoples.⁴ Both RTV and Mediact have contributed to a do-it-yourself media movement in Korea, as citizens realize that they themselves can be 'the media'.

All these factors came together to make the emergence of media for and by migrant workers possible. However, the immediate setting for MWTV's arrival was a massive sit-in struggle at the Myeongdong Cathedral in central Seoul that began in November, 2003. The protest brought together migrant workers from dozens of Asian nationalities, as they called for an end to forced deportation and for the legalization of all unregistered migrant workers in Korea. For the next 400 days, in the midst of constant attacks by Korean immigration police, strong links of pan-ethnic solidarity were forged amongst the protesters. In April 2004, a few months after the start of the protest, MediAct set up a tent at the sit-in site. About 40 migrant workers began to regularly attend a 'Media Education for Migrant Workers' program in this tent and at MediAct's nearby headquarters. Almost all the participants in this first migrant media education program had lived in Korea for a considerable period already, most for about 7-10 years. In the first month of the program, the participants made a video that documented their labor situation and their struggle. A screening was held and some of the migrant participants expressed a desire to continue producing activist media with ideas such as starting a migrant workers radio station or making a documentary film. As one of the participants, Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, a migrant worker from Bangladesh and one of the key founders of MWTV relates, "At first it was just a dream for us to make our own TV programs. During the (sit-in struggle), we did a number of interviews, and we organized

⁴ "Community Media and their Challenges Ahead", RTV 5th international Seminar, 2007.

NOTE: The explosion of Web 2.0 has also been a critical development, particularly the use of web-casting to support Korea's labor movement and other social movements. Two examples are Jinbo Net (a progressive media portal) and Nodong Net (a labor news site).

conferences and seminars. We criticized the way Korean media were reporting migrant workers' issues."⁵ Then in April 2005, with the involvement of MediAct and RTV, a group of migrant workers came together to make a one-off program that they called "The World of Migrant Workers". The show was broadcast on RTV and received such a great response that in August "Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News" began regular production - and MWTV was born.

Thus, it is clear that a number of important factors came together in order for migrant workers to be able to create their own media in Korea. The growing migrant workers movement that exploded into the Myeongdong Cathedral sit-in struggle helped to raise the political consciousness of migrant workers. They self-identified as "labor" and were united in their opposition to the Korean government's policies. This was a critical factor which allowed migrants to overcome the ethnic and cultural divisions that may have prevented the formation of a multi-ethnic alternative media group in the first place. At the same time, the development of the alternative media movement in Korea created the necessary infrastructure and personal and institutional connections which provided migrants with the opportunity to critique the mainstream media and to develop their own media. Finally, the establishment of RTV, only two years earlier, was crucial, as it gave MWTV the initial financial and technical support to begin producing regular programming for migrant workers in Korea. The following section will explain the nature of these programs.

MWTV's Current Programs, Activities and Funding Structure

Currently MWTV produces a bi-weekly multi-lingual news program focusing on issues of importance to migrant workers, news from their home countries and explanations of Korean news for foreign residents. It also produces a monthly Korean-language discussion program: "The World of Migrant Workers". What follows is a description of these programs and two other projects MWTV has established; the Media Academy and the Migrant Workers Film Festival. This section concludes with a look at how MWTV secures funding, and how the recent presidential election in Korea is affecting MWTV.

'Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News'

'Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News' is currently being produced in eleven different languages; Bengali, Burmese, Chinese, English, Indonesian, Korean, Mongolian, Nepali, Russian, Sinhala (Sri Lankan) and Vietnamese. The criteria for choosing which languages to report news in

⁵ AsiaRights Journal, Issue 6, 2006. from <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal/>

has less to do with the size of a particular linguistic community in Korea and more to do with the practicalities of finding a native speaker who is able and willing to translate and anchor the news broadcasts. Changes are occasionally made, for example, a Tagalog broadcast was discontinued last year while Vietnamese was added recently. However, MWTV tries to avoid any interruptions to a particular community's regular broadcast schedule as these news broadcasts are often the only mother-tongue source of information about migrant issues for a community in Korea.

The news team is made up of a staff of three writers who together select the news topics and write the articles that will be broadcast bi-weekly. Since there is a two week gap between each broadcast, it is difficult to cover "breaking news". Instead, the emphasis is put on covering issues that are both "politically and socially necessary for migrant workers living in Korea" and news "of interest"⁶ to migrant communities. Contacts from various migrant communities, Korean volunteers and the news anchors themselves also participate in determining the contents of each broadcast by submitting articles they've come across or passing along news about their particular ethnic community in Korea. As one member of the news team stated, "Because migrant workers have a problem with communication in this society and this causes so much stress, our role is provide necessary and clear information that they can't get from mainstream news."⁷ Interestingly though, most of the news that does not come straight from the communities or from activist organizations, is taken from mainstream Korean media coverage of migrant issues. This coverage is then rewritten or expanded upon in order to more appropriately serve MWTV's audience.

After 6 or 7 news items are selected and the articles are written in Korean, translation into 9 other languages begins. The Korean language news articles are posted to the MWTV online free-board about one week before the recording day. The full report is then first translated into English and then each news anchor is responsible for translating the text from either Korean or English into their own language. The difficulty comes in adjusting the timing of each anchor's presentation to match the video footage and interviews that accompany the reports. A direct translation of the news from either Korean or English is not possible as each language differs so widely in how much time is needed to express the same idea.

Until recently, news recording occurred on the second and fourth Monday of every month at the RTV studio. RTV would then broadcast the news on Tuesdays at 10 am and 11 pm, Thursdays at 10 am and 11 pm and Sundays and Mondays at 1 am. With each news presentation running approximately 8 minutes long, the total broadcast time slot of MWTV 'Multilingual News' is 80 minutes for all 10 languages.

⁶ Interview with Park Su Hyun, May 25, 2008

⁷ Interview with Cui Chun Hua, May 25, 2008

Although MWTV continues to broadcast its programs on RTV, as of June 2008, MWTV has been independently recording and editing the multi-lingual news program. Thus far, recording has taken place on Saturday or Sunday afternoon in a makeshift studio located in the same building as the MWTV office. There are several reasons for this decision. First of all, by recording at RTV's studio, MWTV is forced to follow RTV's schedule. With most migrant workers not being able to take Monday afternoons off of work, this has meant that many of MWTV's anchors have actually been foreign students instead of migrant workers. With their own studio, MWTV hopes that a more flexible recording schedule will make it easier for migrant workers to participate. Equally important as scheduling however, is independence. Independence in this case is not desirable because of a need for greater editorial control, but rather it has become necessary in order to ensure MWTV's future survival. This is because RTV may not be able to play the role of mother station to MWTV in the future because of financial cutbacks. This will be discussed in more detail in the section on funding below.

'The World of Migrant Workers'

Another signature MWTV production is a monthly 60 minute discussion and current affairs program called "The World of Migrant Workers". This program is actually a continuation of the first one-off discussion program created for RTV in 2005. At the time, the program was envisioned as a way for migrant workers to discuss issues affecting their daily lives in an honest and direct manner. MWTV's co-founder Mahbub explains, "At the beginning, we wanted to talk about what migrant workers need."⁸ The initial target audience was migrant workers in Korea who spoke Korean. However, the program has undergone some changes since its inception. Now Minod Moktan, a Nepalese national who produces "The World of Migrant Workers", sees the program as a way for migrant workers to reach out to a general Korean audience, to introduce them to the various cultures that make up this country and to the work and daily life problems faced by migrants. In order to attract a wider audience, and to provide some relief from serious issues such as the crackdown on undocumented labor (which continue to make up the core of the program), "The World of Migrant Workers" has recently begun including a 20 minute talk show segment called "All right, All right!" As Minod described during an interview "Migrant workers have it tough but they also have fun, and this community has so many talents to offer. So I wanted to make some more entertaining programs."⁹ For "All right, All right!" a group of 5 or 6 migrants from different cultural backgrounds discuss topics such as their families and different cultural traditions in a light

⁸ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008.

⁹ Interview with Minod Moktan, June 4, 2008.

and humorous manner. “The World of Migrant Workers is broadcast on RTV on the third week of every month on Sunday evening at 6pm, Monday at 1am, and again on Tuesday afternoon at 1pm. All past programs are also available on MWTV’s website.

Media Education and the ‘MWTV Media Academy’

As our discussion of MWTV’s activities thus far has shown, MWTV operates mainly as a media production organization, relying on its relationship with the public access channel RTV in order to reach its TV audience. While lower-cost and easier-to-use digital technology has helped to democratize media production, some degree of expertise is still required to make quality audio-visual programs and the reality is that there are a limited number of migrants in Korea who have the skills necessary to produce programming for TV. As a result, media education and skills development remain crucial ingredients for the future success of MWTV and migrant media in general.

For this reason, MWTV organizes media educational programs to teach migrant workers and international brides how to make their own media. Last fall, a 2 month program was held in a factory town north of Seoul. At the end of the program, the migrant worker participants (from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and China) came together to screen their films for each other and to receive feedback from their peers. A Chinese-Korean woman who participated in that media education program is now the producer of MWTV’s ‘Multi-Lingual News’. Currently, a month-long photography workshop for migrants and Korean migrant activists is taking place. MWTV is also organizing a media education program specifically for women migrants and international brides which will begin in September.

The first official ‘Media Academy’ was held this past spring in cooperation with MediAct. Fifteen migrants from a diverse range of backgrounds were involved in the program, and graduated as part of the new ‘MWTV Media Production Team’. A production team was envisioned as a way for graduates of the Media Academy to contribute to MWTV in the future by uploading video reports of current affairs in their communities on the MWTV website. In this way, following the popularity of online news sources in Korea such as OhMyNews, MWTV also hopes to create a base of migrant ‘citizen’ reporters.

The central goal of all of these programs is to teach minorities in Korea media skills that will allow them to amplify their collective voice in Korean society, either as part of MWTV or

individually. However, as one Korean staff member of MWTV noted, these education programs are also important for the Korean activists involved in MWTV, as many of them do not come from a media production background.¹⁰ In order to address this issue, MWTV often invites media professionals sympathetic to the cause of migrant media, to give seminars or simply to provide advice to MWTV staff members and volunteers on everything from writing news articles to video editing.

Media Education also allows MWTV the ability to reproduce itself in a difficult and transitory environment. There is always a need to recruit new media activists from the migrant community. Some migrant activists decide to return home, while others are targeted by immigration and deported. Another reason is that MWTV staff members easily burn out, as it is exhausting work for little money. Personal issues and differences of opinion have also led to the departure of several original members. Regardless of the reasons, in order to simply survive as an organization, or to expand as a movement, the Media Academy is a fundamental component of MWTV's activities.

'The Migrant Worker Film Festival'

MWTV's Migrant Worker Film Festival is now in its 3rd year. At last year's festival, 46 films representing 15 different countries were screened. Though other festivals in Korea and around the world often cover migrant workers' issues, this festival is unique in that it focuses exclusively on a broad range of topics specifically related to migration. Through documentaries, comedies, dramas and other genres, audiences are introduced to films that show how migration intersects with issues of labor, human rights, race, children, culture, and gender.

By organizing a film festival, MWTV is able to engage in cultural action of a more aesthetic and entertaining fare. This does not mean that all the films screened are productions from experienced professional directors. Numerous amateur productions by first-time Korean or migrant directors are screened alongside international or domestic feature length films. Overall, a weekend of films, interspersed with cultural performances and parties, allows for a more condensed and diversified celebration of migrant culture. It is also a way to expand the discussion about migration beyond what is possible with MWTV's regular programs. As Mahbub says, one reason MWTV started the film festival was because, "it is easy to get tired of the rushed and machine-like process of filming, editing and recording another round of 'Multi-lingual News' or 'World of Migrant Workers' program."¹¹

The creation of an 'Asian Media Activist Network' has also been one of the festivals'

¹⁰ Interview with Kim Joo Yong, May 30, 2008.

¹¹ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008.

initiatives. In 2006, in the festival's first year of existence, a film by the independent Bangladeshi film group "Breakthrough" was screened and the director, a former migrant worker in Korea, was invited to the festival to give a talk. In 2007, Kiri Dalena of the Filipino multimedia activist collective "ST Exposure" screened her documentary and participated in a festival seminar. Mahbub has even talked about taking the film festival to migrant-sending countries in Asia because in his words, "until now it is always the countries receiving the migrants that hold these events and show these films." He continued, "I heard that in Nepal, 300 Nepalese leave their country to go work in a foreign land everyday, and everyday one dead body of a Nepalese migrant worker is returned home to be buried. People living in migrant-sending countries should also be able to learn about the situation of migrants around the world."¹²

This year's festival, starts in Seoul in mid-August for one weekend and then, over the next month, moves on to four other regional cities around the country where there are large concentrations of migrant workers. In order to effectively organize the regional screenings, MWTV has contacts with migrant workers in each of these four cities. They are in charge of publicizing and arranging the event in their local area. Because some of the migrants who will attend the festival will no doubt be undocumented, the screenings must be held place in a venue that is safe from immigration raids. While in 2007 some of the regional screenings took place in outdoor parks or stadiums, this year with the heightening of the immigration crackdown, screenings will likely all be held inside migrant community centers so that undocumented migrants can also watch the films safely. The hope is that the films will resonate with Koreans and migrants residing in regional cities and that new communities can be built through the act of coming together to watch interesting films.

MWTV's Funding

Support for the Film Festival comes from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security and to a smaller extent from the Korean Film Council. MWTV's 'Media Academy' is funded by limited grants from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security. This year, MWTV is also receiving some funding from the Ministry to produce teaching material for multicultural media education. Recently, MWTV received its first ever international grant. A German foundation called Stiftung Umverteilen will provide the funding for three rounds of a media education program for migrant women that will begin in

¹² Ibid.

September 2008 and run through the winter.

While MWTV's media education programs and the film festival are examples of project-based funding, MWTV's main programs; 'Multi-lingual News' and 'The World of Migrant Workers' are supported by RTV as part of the public access channel's production costs. MWTV is paid 4,000,000 won (about \$4,000 USD) by RTV every month to produce these two programs. RTV's annual budget is 1,500 million won (about \$1.5 million USD) however there is a high chance that their budget will be reduced dramatically in the near future. This is because of the new conservative government of President Lee Myung Bak which took power in early 2008. This new regime has attempted to rapidly realign Korea's political economy in accordance with neo-liberal, market-friendly principles. One result has been the consolidation of the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) and the Korean Broadcasting Commission (KBC) into the new Korea Communications Commission (KCC). RTV's funding will likely be one of the casualties of this streamlining as public access television does not fit the priorities of the new "CEO President" of Korea and his appointees at the KCC. During the first few months of the transition, RTV's funding was put on hold and as a result, MWTV was not paid by RTV for five months causing tremendous anxiety. MWTV's staff of 5 full time workers received no salary during this period.¹³ Finally, the funding freeze was lifted in mid-July and MWTV received the money it was owed.

However, while the financial problems have been temporarily relieved, this experience has acted as a warning that funding from the Korean Communications Commission via RTV is precarious at best. Thus, MWTV is seeking ways to survive in the worst case scenario that RTV's funding will completely dry up in the future. As one Korean staff member noted, "We realize that we cannot survive by depending on RTV anymore. We need to diversify our support base."¹⁴ For this reason, a membership drive was launched in the early spring with the aim to build up a core network of paying members, who are given the opportunity to participate in MWTV's general meetings. The campaign has been relatively successful thus far, with around 100 members joining and providing a flexible monthly 'membership fee' since March. This now provides MWTV with about 1,000,000 won (\$1000 USD) per month in earnings. It remains to be seen whether membership support can be expanded and whether alternative methods of

¹³ News anchors for 'Multi-Lingual Migrant Workers News' were until recently paid for their efforts, but as of May, 2008, anchors are now considered volunteers. While it was relatively easy to attract and retain foreign students and migrants with a part-time job in 'the media', once this role became a non-paying position, motivation had to suddenly be generated solely from a desire to be an activist for migrant worker issues.

¹⁴ Interview with Kim Joo Yong, May 30, 2008.

financial support can be developed. As Mahbub puts it,

“We have two choices. We don’t have to be like Arirang TV¹⁵ but even if we are 10 percent similar it wouldn’t be so bad. If we go this route, we can get stable financial support. Sure this has its drawbacks but...If we don’t want to go this way we can be a true independent media broadcaster. But the only way to survive this way is to make a network with other organizations or NGOs and to work together with them. We cannot survive alone. We need the support of other migrant groups.”¹⁶

There are many who believe that the only way for MWTV to maintain its role as a critical voice for and by migrant workers in Korea is to go this second route. Although the sudden funding freeze has been a shock to MWTV, as one Korean researcher argues, “This (loss of government funding) is probably for the better in the long run. Migrant activist groups need to be really careful about accepting government funding because it makes them scared to tell the truth.”¹⁷ Indeed, as we will demonstrate in the next section, government funding and other mechanisms of control have had a great impact on the orientation of migrant supporting NGOs in Korea in general, and on MWTV in particular. We will first briefly describe the background and influence of one of the main disciplinary mechanisms – Korea’s version of ‘multiculturalism’.

The Power of “Multiculturalism” in Korea

This paper opened with a brief description of the history of migrant labor in Korea, explaining how the first migrants to arrive in Korea came in the late 1980's and the early 1990's to fill labor shortages. While the numbers of migrant workers in Korea continued to grow through the 1990s, a new phenomenon was also taking shape. By the late 1990s, Korean bachelors, particularly in rural areas, were importing brides¹⁸ from countries like Vietnam, China and the Philippines. This was the result of a number of factors, including a surplus of bachelors in Korea and a lack of marriageable Korean partners for men living in rural areas. The thriving international marriage industry in Korea has now expanded to include urban bachelors and foreign brides from a host of Asian countries.¹⁹

In order to maintain social cohesion in a rapidly changing society, since 2005 the Korean

¹⁵ Arirang TV is a public service agency whose mandate is to spread Korean culture and news to the world.

¹⁶ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008.

¹⁷ Interview with Lee Seon Ok, June 16, 2008.

¹⁸ Similar to what in the West is called ‘mail-order brides’.

¹⁹ In 2005, 36% of marriages in rural areas were between Korean men and ‘foreign wives’, while about 13.6% of marriages overall in Korea were international marriages. In terms of nationality, Vietnamese made up 53.2% of total foreign wives, followed by Chinese (34.1%), Filipinos (6.9%) and others (5.8%). [2005 Statistics] The latest trend is that more women are coming from Uzbekistan, Mongol, and the Philippines.

government has instituted policy to deal with these new “multicultural families.”²⁰ On April 26, 2006, South Korean president Roh Moo-Hyun passed two new acts: 'Act on the Social Integration of Mix-Race Families and Immigrants’ and “Act on Foreign Wife Integration”. President Roh declared that the “the trend towards multi-race/multicultural society is irresistible” and therefore “it’s high time to take measures to incorporate multicultural policies.”²¹ The Ministry of Education and Human Development (MOE&HD) also announced a shift in civic education textbooks from an emphasis on mono-ethnicity towards multiculturalism and the values of tolerance.²²

However, it is important to note that the Korean government declared the new policy of multiculturalism by first differentiating foreign brides from migrant workers. Lee Seon Ok in a book chapter titled *Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement* (2007) describes the government’s new stance as a way to maintain control over a growing population of migrants. Lee explains how foreign brides who receive permanent residence status through marriage are regarded as subjects in need of integration and government support through Korea's multicultural policy. The children of these marriages are also covered under this policy.²³ However, migrant workers and their children, as non-nationals, are considered temporary sojourners. They are a disposable source of cheap labor rotating in and out of the country and since they should return to their home countries as soon as possible, multiculturalism policy doesn't support their integration into Korean society. Instead, they are placed under the jurisdiction of the EPS labor policy, with its attendant minimum human rights protection, and constant threats of deportation as they are essentially regarded as ‘labor’, not as ‘individuals’.²⁴

Thus the government’s new preoccupation with ‘multiculturalism’ has cleverly moved the

²⁰ While the government now officially refers to the children of these marriages as ‘multicultural children’, some other organizations refer to them as ‘KOSIANS’. KOSIAN is a compound word made from ‘Korean’ and ‘Asian’, and indicates those children from foreign wives and Korean males. The word was coined as a way to avoid the term ‘mixed race’ which has negative connotation. However, ‘KOSIAN’ is a controversial word as some argue that having a distinctive category for children of foreign wives is discriminatory in itself. (from Heejung, Kim (2007), ‘Official Multiculturalism Revisited: Multicultural Transition in South Korea’, Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

²¹ Heejung Kim (2007), ‘Official Multiculturalism Revisited: Multicultural Transition in South Korea’, Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books

²² This is a rather drastic departure from previous civic education where the most important topic in the civic textbook is how distinctive and unique Koreans are from all the other ethnic groups in the world and how lucky Korea is to be ethnically homogenous. (from Heejung, Kim (2007), ‘Official Multiculturalism Revisited: Multicultural Transition in South Korea’, Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

²³ Interestingly, Lee writes that “the government doesn't recognize a foreign man who marries a Korean woman as an object of multiculturalism policy even though he also has a semi-national status. Foreign brides are considered to be under their husband's control since patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in Korean society. Thus Korean society accepts foreign brides as members of society. However Korean society refuses to acknowledge that foreign husbands are members of Korean society because it cannot accept foreign husbands as substitute patriarchs.” (from Seonok, Lee (2007), ‘Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement’, Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

²⁴ Seonok Lee (2007), ‘Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement’, Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

discussion away from the labor issues of migrant workers. This has had a pronounced affect on migrant supporting NGOs and on the migrant movement overall. Lee Seon Ok points out that while Korean multiculturalism is conducted from the top-down by the Korean government, it is facilitated by migrant supporting NGOs. Originally, many of these organizations were focused on improving the labor conditions and rights of migrant workers but they are now meeting the government at the conjunction of multiculturalism. One reason is that the integration of foreign brides is regarded as a very important issue by mainstream Korean society.²⁵ Problems with the cultural adaptation of these brides and with domestic violence have emerged as serious social issues. But Lee argues that it is largely because of the significant amount of government funding at stake that migrant supporting NGOs are advocating 'multiculturalism' and as a result "have stopped paying attention to the basic labor situation of migrant workers."²⁶ As Lee writes, migrant supporting NGOs "are the main advocators of multiculturalism. They act as the messengers of the government's multicultural policy and the beneficiaries of multicultural funding."²⁷

We will now turn back to MWTV to analyze how it has adapted to this hegemonic discourse of multiculturalism and to the changing focus of Korea's migrant movement - the movement MWTV grew out of.

How 'Multiculturalism' and 'Deportability' Affect MWTV's Orientation

As a voice of migrant workers and a platform for the discussion of migrant issues in Korea, MWTV provides us with a very clear and grounded example to understand the hegemonic discourse of multiculturalism in Korean society and the related state policies being enacted. By looking at MWTV, we can see that the Korean State is attempting to control and manage the growth of a more diverse society through the 'carrot' of multicultural funding, and the 'stick' of deportation. I will first discuss how this 'carrot' has affected MWTV.

Since MWTV's inception, it has largely depended on government funding to survive, even though most of this funding is indirectly received from the government through RTV. This relationship with RTV has allowed MWTV to maintain a more critical and independent voice than would likely be possible if funding was directly allocated by the government. However, the limits to this independence have recently become very clear as the new Korean Communications Commission threatens to remove all funding for RTV's public access programming. As well, MWTV's secretary Kim Joo Yong recalled how an RTV staffer recently asked why MWTV always

²⁵ Lee writes, "There is an interesting international component to this concern as Korean society started worrying about social stability and the second generation of children from intermarriage couples after seeing images of the French riots in 2005." (from Lee, 2007)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lee, 2007

focuses on serious issues such as protests and the crackdown on migrant workers. The staffer suggested that MWTV try to make “more entertaining” programming.²⁸ As Joo Yong says, “RTV is also a kind of mass media. RTV also prefers more popular things.”²⁹

Earlier in this paper, we described MWTV’s origins in the migrant labor movement and the long sit-in struggle at the Myeongdong Cathedral. MWTV was clearly envisioned by its founders as a way to counter mass media coverage of migrants and to bring attention to the plight of foreign workers who toil away in “3D” jobs. One incident from 2005 clearly demonstrates MWTV’s founding politics. The Korean Ministry of Culture had organized a Migrant Cultural Festival while the Ministry of Justice was in the middle of a large-scale crackdown on undocumented migrant workers. In an interview with *AsiaRights Journal*, Mahbub is quoted as saying that the Ministry of Culture wanted to show that “we are all one”. However, MWTV was critical of the Festival, seeing it as “an effort to whitewash the situation,” because as Mahbub put it, “if we haven’t got the right to work, cultural rights mean nothing.”³⁰

But over the course of three years, a heated debate has arisen within MWTV over whether to remain true to the organization’s roots - in migrant labor activism - or to take a more “multicultural” approach and expand coverage to include all minorities in Korea, regardless of whether they came to the country on a migrant workers visa or not. Differences in opinion have even led to the departure of some founding members.

The discourse of multiculturalism has obviously had an impact on this debate and on MWTV’s productions, as can be seen with the new talk show “All right, All right!” The show’s producer, Minod Moktan argues for a need to make programming that demonstrates the diverse customs of migrant workers and their cultural celebrations in Korea. He wants to show Koreans that migrants are diverse and unique human beings who are more than just a cheap source of labor. According to Minod;

“We have to try to appeal to a wider audience. If we only complain about serious issues and do media activism, we cannot change Koreans’ thinking. If we always talk about sad stories, Koreans consider us servants. It gives us a bad image. That’s why we need to talk more about our cultures and other issues. Migrant workers must work together with Korean people to change society. We can only change society with Koreans.”³¹

However, it is clear that he wants to define multiculturalism in his own way; as a celebration

²⁸ Interview with Kim Joo Yong, May 30, 2008

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *AsiaRights Journal*, Issue 6, 2006. from <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal/>

³¹ Interview with Minod Moktan, June 4, 2008

of the cultural diversity of *migrant workers*. In effect, this is a strategic attempt to demonstrate that migrants are more than just workers while at the same time trying not to lose control of the term ‘*worker*’, since after all it is shared labor conditions and the experience of labor exploitation which serves to unite this diverse population.

However, others argue that the problems faced by all ethnic minorities in Korea are similar, and cannot be limited to simply ‘labor issues’. As Mahbub puts it, “There are 1 million foreigners in Korea altogether, and 400 thousand of them are migrant workers. The rest are foreign brides, children, skilled workers and immigrants.”³² In other words, Mahbub would like include the 600 thousand foreigners in Korea who don’t fit into the category of ‘migrant worker’. He wants to make media that develops solidarity through the shared experience of being an ‘other’ in a highly homogeneous society. The goal is to affect cultural change in Korean society by changing ideas; teaching Koreans to be more tolerant of diversity by appealing to a shared sense of human rights rather than continuously criticizing the government’s migrant worker policies. Arguing for the need to adapt to the recent changes in Korean society Mahbub says,

“At that time (in 2005) migrant workers had a really hard time. Because of the Employment Permit System many migrants were fired or committed suicide. The most important thing for us, as media, was to help migrant workers. But now, I am married to a Korean so I’m a naturalized Korean, but I face a lot of discrimination. I want to do something about this.”³³

The population of foreigners in Korea has definitely increased and diversified. However, while the voices of migrant workers and other foreigners are increasingly being heard and there is more recognition of their presence in Korean society, the problems affecting migrant workers have not disappeared. On the contrary, the crackdown on undocumented migrant workers which began last August has intensified under the Lee Myung Bak regime. As well, the Korean government still strongly represses any attempt by migrant workers to form their own trade union.³⁴ This is why there is some resistance to the idea that ‘multiculturalism’ in whatever form, can actually improve the lives of migrant workers in Korea.

However, it would be unfair to say that MWTV is in danger of abandoning its roots and being absorbed by the heavy embrace of multiculturalism. MWTV cannot escape the hegemonic discourse of multiculturalism in Korean society but it appears that the ‘top-down’ form of multiculturalism advocated by the Korean state as a way to maintain social and economic harmony has not been accepted at face value by MWTV. Instead, multiculturalism’s potential as a discursive

³² Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008

³³ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008.

³⁴ The Migrants Trade Union has been recognized by the Seoul High Court. However the Ministry of Labor has appealed this decision and the government continues to target the leaders for arrest and deportation.

tool is actively being negotiated. The question is whether the discursive tool of multiculturalism can be more usefully wielded as a tool for social change by maintaining the focus on the labor situation of migrant workers, or whether it would be more effective to include all foreigners in South Korea. Indeed, by strategically and selectively employing the discourse of multiculturalism, migrants may be able to more effectively communicate with Korean society and improve their situation. As the anthropologist James C. Scott famously argued, “Conformity is often a self-conscious strategy and resistance is a carefully balanced affair that avoids all-or-nothing confrontations.”³⁵ In this way, MWTV’s response to the power of government funding agencies and multicultural discourse should not be seen as submission, but as strategic resistance.

Aside from the ‘carrot’ of multicultural funding, there is also a ‘stick’ in the Korean State’s arsenal which exerts a considerable influence over MWTV’s orientation. This is the ‘stick’ of deportation, or to be more precise, the *threat* of deportation, which constantly looms over the heads of all migrant workers. This threat is also what makes MWTV such a unique case study as an alternative media organization. The vibrancy of Korea’s civil society and media movement over the past two decades has resulted in an explosion of alternative media projects. This is comparable to what has happened in Western liberal democracies since the 1960s as citizens began to resent the powerful influence mainstream capitalist media had over their lives. But MWTV is an experiment in alternative media run not by ‘citizens’ but by migrant workers, some of whom are undocumented (or ‘illegal’ to use the official designation). Thus, in a sense, MWTV exists ‘on the border’ between the political space generated by Korea’s civil society and the feudalism of the international migrant labor regime. Migrant workers are still essentially non-political subjects who are quickly deported if they become politically active. This can clearly be seen in the targeting and deportation of the Migrant Trade Union’s leadership. But as the anthropologist Nicholas P. De Genova forcefully states, “It is deportability, and not deportation per se, that has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity.”³⁶ He goes on to write, “Migrant ‘illegality’ is lived through a palpable sense of deportability, which is to say, the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state.”³⁷ In other words the ‘deportability’ of migrants is a powerful disciplining device. It is this “possibility of deportation” which sustains the vulnerability of migrant workers and discourages them from being “too critical” or even simply “political”.

This reality exerts a profound influence over the character and orientation of MWTV. Mahbub recalled in an interview getting phone calls from the Immigration Department asking him

³⁵ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1985, p. 285

³⁶ Nicholas P. De Genova. (2002) ‘Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 438

³⁷ *Ibid*, 439.

if there were undocumented migrants working at MWTV. He also related how the police have called on him to ‘have a chat’.³⁸ Surveillance continues, as can be seen in a recent Ministry of Justice report that describes how migrant workers in Korea have their own media which “protests against government policy”, warning that “we can’t exclude the possibility of immigrant riots such as what occurred in France in 2005.”³⁹ Another example of surveillance occurred a few months ago with the reported attendance of an undercover immigration agent at MWTV’s 3rd anniversary party. The agent likely was there to collect information on leaders of the Migrants Trade Union, who were subsequently arrested a few days afterwards.

While only a few MWTV members have been deported, as De Genova puts it “some are deported so that most may remain (undeported) – as workers,”⁴⁰ who are more easily exploitable as a result. It is this sense of vulnerability from the feeling of being constantly under surveillance which serves as a powerful disciplining mechanism, and yet one more incentive to ‘go multicultural’.

How the Diverse Membership of MWTV Affects its Orientation

External factors such as the hegemony of multicultural discourse and multicultural funding and the disciplining power of deportation certainly influence the identity and orientation of MWTV. However, internal factors such as MWTV’s composition – its diverse membership – force it to constantly negotiate and re-negotiate its orientation and identity as well.

The two most clearly defined social groups that make up MWTV are migrants and Koreans. One of the defining characteristics of MWTV - which sets it apart from other media organizations that cater to migrants in Korea - is that it was founded and is still predominantly run by migrant workers themselves. Aside from its many volunteers and activists, MWTV currently has a full-time staff of five; made up of 3 migrants (Chinese, Nepalese, and Burmese) and 2 Koreans. The 5 member Board of Directors are all non-Koreans. So this brings up the question; what role do Koreans play in MWTV?

In fact, MWTV would likely cease to exist if it were not for its dedicated Korean staff, volunteers and media activists. Korean members provide the language skills and message framing skills that are crucial for an organization whose mandate involves communicating with the Korean public. Especially at the beginning, Korean media activists also provided the technical skills

³⁸ Mahbub also related how in the early days he would sometimes get phone calls from strangers who would curse at him and tell him to go home.

³⁹ A report titled, “체류외국인 100 만시대와 불법체류외국인 단속” from www.moj.go.kr, accessed on May 30, 2008.

⁴⁰ De Genova. (2002) ‘Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 438

required to create quality media productions. Koreans are also essential because of the social capital that they bring to the organization. As noted earlier in this paper, Korean civil society has greatly developed and expanded over the past two decades. It is MWTV's connections with other related social movement groups and activists which sustains it. However, most migrants don't have the experience or cultural knowledge to maneuver this terrain.

Obviously though, any organization which involves both natives and foreigners who lack the same degree of linguistic, political and cultural understanding, will have great difficulty managing power relations. Many well-intentioned Korean organizations that work with migrant workers have failed to include migrants in their decision making process. As Mahbub says, "Almost all social movements or cultural events are led by Koreans. Minorities should have more roles. That's why we are invisible. We should not just follow Koreans unconditionally."⁴¹ Mahbub tells the following story;

"Once, the Bangladesh community prepared a play. We got some funding from the Gyeonggi Culture Foundation and we worked really hard on this play. But when we presented it, a Korean priest took over on stage, introducing and explaining our play to the audience. It looked like he was the one who organized this play. He wanted to take credit for our efforts. I thought that we should be careful not to let Koreans push us into the background."⁴²

Issues of power balance are especially sensitive in an alternative media organization that is fighting for greater equality and respect for migrant workers. As Chris Atton writes, "if the aim of radical media is to effect social or political change, then it is crucial...that they practice what they preach."⁴³ Of course this is often difficult in the real world of media production with deadlines and stress. As one Korean member of MWTV admits, "It may be the role of the Korean activist to assist the migrant worker but there is some work which Koreans have an easier time handling. Sometimes this role may seem to give the Korean member power. Though we Koreans try to let migrant worker members be in charge, it's not easy for us."⁴⁴

Beyond the responsibility to 'practice what one preaches' though, the issue of sharing power has important implications for the actual orientation of MWTV. By this we mean who gets to decide what kind of media MWTV actually is. The concept of 'alternative media' is by no means fixed, or widely understood. Even media theorists who make their living studying non-mainstream media don't agree on a precise definition of 'alternative media' and a wide range of similar terms,

⁴¹ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Chris Atton, *Current Issues in Alternative Media Research*, Sociology Compass 1/1 (2007): 19

⁴⁴ Interview with Kim Joo Yong, May 30, 2008

such as “alternative journalism, citizen journalism, citizen’s media, community media, democratic media, emancipatory media, radical media and social movement media.”⁴⁵ According to Atton (2007) the different uses of these terms depends on “the emphasis they place on how to conceptualize ‘media’ and ‘communication’, and how the terms relate to social and cultural practices.”⁴⁶ Thus it would be rather absurd to imagine that one definition of ‘alternative media’ could be easily reached within an organization as culturally diverse as MWTV. In particular, an understanding of ‘alternative media’ is highly dependent on a particular society’s political development, the vibrancy of its civil society, and its historical experience with capitalism. As we’ve mentioned a few times in this paper, the development of South Korea’s civil society in general, and its media activist movement in particular, has been explosive. As well, given the fact that Korea’s three main newspapers are highly conservative leftovers from the pre-democratic era, alternative media in Korea has been envisioned as a tool to combat entrenched media and political power, to expand representation, and to free consciousness. These goals are quite familiar to any western practitioner or theorist of alternative media. However, it does not follow that all migrant workers involved see MWTV and ‘alternative media’ through the same lens as Korean media activists involved in MWTV. One anecdote may be useful to describe this. While looking for a new Vietnamese news anchor, a migrant MWTV staff member argued against selecting a potential anchor because - in her eyes - this woman wasn’t attractive. She insisted that people would not want to watch the news if it was presented by an ‘ugly’ anchor and that they should find a more beautiful one. But for the Korean members of MWTV, this is exactly the type of mainstream media cultural conditioning that alternative media should counter.

Of course, when it comes to the question of ‘understanding’ alternative media, it would be wrong to try to draw a neat line with Koreans on one side and all migrant workers on the other. The countries that migrant workers come from are historically and politically very diverse and thus their experiences with and conceptions of alternative media are also highly divergent. As well, there are different views depending on the social background of migrants and their position in Korea. This has become especially evident with the participation of more foreign students as news anchors. A foreign student and a migrant worker from the same country generally come from very different class backgrounds. As well, their experiences in Korea are extremely different from the day-to-day experiences of migrant workers. For these reasons, one staff member at MWTV noted that while media education to develop media skills was important, it was equally essential that MWTV puts on regular workshops to discuss and to develop a shared conception of alternative media.⁴⁷ However, this is also part of what makes MWTV so unique in Korean society. Mahbub puts it this way:

⁴⁵ Atton, *Current Issues in Alternative Media Research*, Sociology Compass 1/1 (2007): 18

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interview with Kim Ju Yong, May 30, 2008.

“Although some of the people participating in MWTV don’t understand alternative media, this is not necessarily a bad thing. They just want to join MWTV because it’s fun to make media. It’s interesting how we all just work together. That itself can be alternative media. Still now, the problem with this society is that people are not mixing. This mixing is one of MWTV’s main roles.”⁴⁸

Or in the words of Kim Joo Yong “I think that working together is a kind of movement in itself.”⁴⁹

This is exactly what Clemencia Rodríguez in *Fissures in the Mediascape* (2001) describes when she writes about “citizens’ media”. Citizens’ media refers to alternative media that works to facilitate and maintain processes of citizenship-building. Of course, the use of this term “citizens’ media” sounds ironic given the fact that MWTV is mainly run by ‘non-citizens’, but Rodríguez is not talking about liberal democracy’s definition of citizenship - a legal status that is granted (or denied) by the state. Rodríguez builds on Chantal Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy and citizenship. This theory attempts to re-appropriate the term “citizen” to describe someone who is involved in interactions and relationships which provide him or her with access to different fractions of power. These fractions of power include symbolic power, psychological power, material power, and political power. Through these interactions citizens can begin to envision and build their own communities. Likewise, Rodríguez’s concept of “citizens’ media” describes media that promotes symbolic processes which allow people to name the world and speak the world in their own terms, formats, and aesthetic values. As opposed to the classic sense of media, Rodríguez does not consider citizens’ media as communication intended to inform and influence people. Instead she focuses on communication as social interaction.⁵⁰ In this sense it is not so important *what* MWTV reports on but *how* it reports - and that it reports at all.

Finally, while migrant supporting NGOs fall over each other in the rush to promote a top-down discourse and application of ‘multiculturalism’, and as MWTV itself attempts to negotiate its own identity and future survival, a more subdued, grassroots form of multiculturalism, what can be called ‘everyday multiculturalism’ has taken root in MWTV’s office and makeshift studio. As different ethnic groups come together, to decide what counts as news for migrant workers and to serve as an information, education and entertainment nexus for migrants in Korea, it is this practice of multiculturalism in everyday lives which is building a new society in South Korea.

⁴⁸ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008

⁴⁹ Interview with Kim Joo Yong, May 30, 2008.

⁵⁰ Rodríguez, Clemencia (2001) *Fissures in the Mediascape. An International Study of Citizens’ Media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

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