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The Opening of the North Korean Mind

Pyongyang Versus the Digital Underground

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On a cold, clear night in September 2014, a man I'll call Ahn walked up to the edge of the Tumen River on the Chinese side of the heavily guarded border between China and North Korea. At its narrowest points, the Tumen measures a little over 150 feet wide, and Ahn could easily see the North Korean side from where he stood. In two bags, he was carrying 100 USB drives filled with films, television shows, music, and e-books from around the world.

Almost anywhere else, such material would be considered completely innocuous. At this border, however, it constitutes highly illicit, dangerous contraband. In the totalitarian state of North Korea, citizens are allowed to see and hear only those media products created or sanctioned by the government. Pyongyang considers foreign information of any kind a threat and expends great effort keeping it out. The regime's primary fear is that exposure to words, images, and sounds from the outside world could make North Koreans disillusioned with the state of affairs in their own country, which could lead them to desire—or even demand—change.

Ahn is a defector who escaped from North Korea in 2004 and now lives in the South Korean capital, Seoul, where he runs a nongovernmental organization that sends information into North Korea. He is one of the dozens of defectors from North Korea whom I have interviewed in the past ten years. Defectors' testimony is not always reliable, nor is it enough to piece together an accurate portrait of life inside the opaque and secretive country. But when combined with other information, defectors' stories offer invaluable insights.

At the edge of the river that night, Ahn knew precisely what to do; he had made this kind of trip to the border many times before. With his senses on high alert, he scanned the area for guards. Once he felt certain that he wasn't being watched, he placed his USB drives into a plastic bin, which he wrapped in a thick plastic bag. He then tied the package to a sturdy wire, grabbed one end, and hurled the bin into the air. It landed in the water, close to the North Korean bank of the river. There, a North Korean man whom I will call Ku stealthily waded in and grabbed the bin.

Of the two men, Ku had the far more dangerous job: taking the goods into North Korea. Ahn's organization was paying him the equivalent of approximately \$100 to retrieve the USB drives, a sizable fee that would allow Ku to provide for his household for a month or two. But Ku was taking a huge risk: if North Korean border guards caught him, he could be beaten, sent to a prison camp, or even executed. Ku climbed out of the river and shed his incriminating wet clothes. He changed into a dry outfit and made his way back into the city where he lives. (I'm withholding the location at the request of Ahn's organization.) There, Ku sold each drive for about \$1 on the black market to fellow citizens eager to get a glimpse of life on the outside.

Although North Korea is often referred to as “the hermit kingdom,” over the past two decades, many cracks have appeared in the wall that the state has built around its people. Rudimentary media-smuggling operations such as Ahn’s have helped North Koreans learn more about their country and the outside world, often at great risk to themselves.

Despite the threat of punishment by North Korea’s brutal security forces, distributing foreign information has become a profitable business in North Korea. This is partly due to the ways in which the country’s traditionally closed economy has changed in the past 20 years. From 1994 until 1998, an extraordinary famine swept North Korea, killing hundreds of thousands—perhaps even millions—of people. In response to its failure to feed its people, the government allowed small markets known as *jangmadang* to open so that people could buy basic goods from one another or barter.

The *jangmadang* represented a rudimentary form of capitalism profoundly at odds with the hard-line communism and state control of the economy that the government had enforced for decades. But when the famine finally subsided, the regime decided to continue tolerating most of the *jangmadang*, possibly out of a recognition that the state alone could not reliably provide for the majority of its people. Since then, the small, informal markets have evolved into sophisticated, large-scale operations, some of which feature hundreds of stalls selling a wide range of goods. The most reliable estimates put the number of large markets in the country at somewhere between 380 and 730. There are many more smaller ones. According to the most reliable estimates, around three-quarters of the North Korean population depends partly or solely on private market activity in order to survive.

In addition to these so-called gray markets, which have made it easier to distribute banned technologies and media, the more conventional black market has also aided the influx of outside information. North Korea currently derives much of its GDP from drug production and trafficking, currency counterfeiting, and money laundering. The illicit networks that support such activities have also created distribution opportunities for foreign media. Today, a motley crew of foreign nongovernmental organizations, defectors, smugglers, middlemen, businessmen, and bribable North Korean soldiers and officials have cobbled together a surprisingly robust network that links ordinary citizens to the outside world through contraband cell phones, laptops, tablet computers, and data drives.

These digital goods have come to play an important (although often invisible) role in North Korean society. Thanks to smuggled media, more North Koreans than ever before now fully perceive the gap between the rosy picture that the regime paints of their country and its leaders and the far grimmer reality. Just as important, many have come to understand that the outside world hardly resembles the wasteland of deprivation, immorality, and criminality that official propaganda depicts.

This burgeoning awareness poses little short-term danger for the regime of Kim Jong Un, which remains highly capable of repressing its people. But in a totalitarian society where the authorities’ legitimacy and power depend to a large extent on their ability to delude the population, a growing digital underground might represent a long-term existential threat.

With its expanding nuclear arsenal and penchant for provocation, North Korea is sure to remain a potential source of regional (and even global) instability for a long time to come no matter what outsiders do. But governments, organizations, and individuals seeking ways to make North Korea a less repressive place and a less dangerous international actor should take heed of the power of information to change the country from the inside.

COMBATING *JUCHE*

On June 11, 2012, a flash flood hit Sinhung County, in the North Korean province of South Hamgyong. A 14-year-old schoolgirl named Han Hyon Gyong desperately tried to keep her family’s portraits of the country’s founder, Kim Il Sung, and his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, above the

floodwaters. She drowned trying to save the sacred images.

For her efforts, the government posthumously granted her the Kim Jong Il Youth Prize. Her parents, teacher, and Youth League leaders also received awards, for helping foster her patriotism. Han's school was renamed after her, and the country's official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, praised the system that "nurtures such children."

Such extreme devotion to the regime reflects the power of *juche*, North Korea's official ideology, which emphasizes the country's self-sufficiency and venerates the rulers of the Kim dynasty as quasi deities whose judgment and wisdom may never be questioned. In 1974, Kim Jong Il sought to systematize *juche* by issuing a list called "Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System"; most of the principles involved acknowledging the absolute authority of the supreme leader and pledging total obedience to the state. Kim demanded that all North Korean citizens memorize the principles and adhere to them in their daily lives, an order enforced through weekly "self-criticism" sessions and peer surveillance. This practice continues today. During weekly meetings in classrooms, offices, and factories, citizens recite the ten principles and are called on to criticize themselves and one another for failing to live in perfect accordance with *juche*. North Koreans begin participating in these sessions around the time they enter first grade.

Having inculcated *juche* into its citizens from a very young age, the state does everything it can to ensure that as they grow older, they are exposed to as little contradictory information as possible. One of the most serious crimes that a North Korean can commit is to consume banned media. According to Freedom House, "listening to unauthorized foreign broadcasts and possessing dissident publications are considered 'crimes against the state'" in North Korea and "carry serious punishments, including hard labor, prison sentences, and the death penalty." On a single day in 2013, according to *JoongAng Ilbo*, a major South Korean newspaper, the government executed 80 people in seven cities for violating such laws.

Every North Korean household has a statesanctioned radio that broadcasts official propaganda throughout the day. The volume of these radios can be adjusted, but they cannot be turned off entirely. The tuners are disabled. All news reports and broadcasts go through several rounds of internal censorship before they appear. Kim Jong Il's book *Guidance for Journalists* instructs reporters and editors "to carry articles in which they unflinchingly hold the president in high esteem, adore him and praise him as the great revolutionary leader"—instructions that they faithfully follow.

With the exception of a few hundred or perhaps a few thousand elites, North Koreans have no Internet access. Schools, public libraries, and offices are served by a hived-off intranet system known as *Kwangmyong*. Trusted officials are tasked with scouring the Internet for material that they deem safe enough to add to the closed network, such as select scientific articles and health-related information.

All households have to register their electronic media equipment with local authorities. Occasionally, inspectors go door-to-door to see what's inside people's media players. If they find illegal content, they make arrests and seize the contraband, which they send to their superiors in Pyongyang. Prior to the spread of USB drives, forbidden movies and TV shows were often smuggled into the country on DVDs. To prevent people from quickly ejecting and hiding banned DVDs when a raid began, inspectors would shut off the electricity for an entire apartment building before entering it, trapping discs inside players. The inspectors would then confiscate all the DVD players, turn the electricity back on, plug them in, and press the eject buttons to find out what the residents had been watching.

Such efforts highlight just how nervous digital technologies make the regime. But they are a double-edged sword that also gives the government a tool to better surveil its people and inundate them with still more propaganda. Take mobile phones. North Korea, with an estimated population of around 25 million, now has around three million cell phone users. Almost all of them are limited to the state-run *Koryolink* provider and network and can make only domestic calls, which are subject

to frequent monitoring. But some people now have illegal phones that have been smuggled into North Korea for use near the border, where they can connect to Chinese cellular networks. The security services use detectors that can track down illicit calls that last longer than five minutes. So to avoid detection, one must make a brief call, relocate, then call again to continue the conversation.

Cell phones can carry content that authorities don't want people to see, but they are also easier to track than other conduits of illegal information. Data transfers are monitored tightly and can alert authorities to anyone who might be accessing banned material. Police officers often stop mobile phone users on the street to inspect their devices for sensitive content; the officers sometimes seize phones and mete out punishments on the spot. *Koryolink* has incrementally added features such as cameras to its devices and has slowly rolled out services such as text messaging and video calling. Users are now able to access approved intranet sites, including that of *Rodong Sinmun*; they can also receive text messages from the ruling Korean Workers' Party.

More problematic from the regime's perspective are portable media players, since they are harder to track than cell phones. Many North Koreans can now purchase black-market Chinese-made MP4 devices that play videos stored on smuggled memory cards. MP4 players are small, and their rechargeable batteries last for about two hours at a time, allowing people to watch movies without needing to plug in—a crucial feature, since most North Korean households lack uninterrupted access to electricity.

North Koreans have also embraced the Notetel, a portable device that can access media like a computer does—via USB drives, memory cards, and DVDs—but also functions like a television and a radio. These Chinese-made devices began appearing on the black market around 2005 and cost the equivalent of \$30–\$50, depending on the model. The regime cracked down on them at first but then legalized the popular devices in 2014 after requiring that all Notetels be registered with local authorities. Since last summer, however, defector-led news organizations have reported that the regime has reversed course and is back to prohibiting the possession of these devices.

Inspectors sometimes burst into a home and check to see if any media players are warm from use. To prepare for that event, many Notetel users keep a legal North Korean DVD in their device at all times so that during a raid they can pull out the USB drive holding the illegal media that they've actually been watching, conceal it, and pretend they'd been using the legal DVD all along. The power, and danger, of Notetels is that they overcome “the twin barriers to foreign media consumption—surveillance and power outages,” Sokeel Park of Liberty in North Korea, a nongovernmental organization based in California, told Reuters in March 2015. “If you were to design the perfect device for North Koreans, it would be this.”

Of course, North Koreans don't just have to worry about the authorities: their neighbors could also report them for suspicious activity. So North Koreans have developed various security protocols for watching banned media. Doors are locked, windows are closed, curtains are drawn. Some people hide under blankets with their devices. Families huddle close together to watch illicit movies and TV shows, sometimes sharing earbud headphones—which, if held in just the right position, produce enough sound for a few people to hear but not enough to leak through the walls.

THE JANGMADANG GENERATION

The North Koreans most affected by the influx of digital technology are young people. They enjoy historically unprecedented access to foreign information—which, according to many defectors, is undermining the grip that *juche* has traditionally held on young North Korean minds.

Every young defector I have met had watched foreign films and shows, had read foreign books, and knew a decent amount about the world outside North Korea before escaping the country. Defectors say that they are not unrepresentative in this respect and that many young North Koreans with no

interest in leaving their country nevertheless take the risk of obtaining and consuming foreign media. As Min Jun, a recent defector in his early 20s, told me, “In our generation, young people get together quietly in each other’s homes, put on South Korean K-pop, and have a little dance party. We have no idea if we’re doing it right, but we dance with the music on low.”

On its own, such exposure to foreign culture probably wouldn’t mean much. But a number of other factors also set young North Koreans apart from older generations and increase the salience of their access to outside media and digital technology. First, those younger than 35—about a quarter of the population—are known as the *jangmadang* generation because they came of age buying food and other goods at those small, semilegal markets. They have rarely, if ever, stood in lines to collect state-allotted rations, as their parents and grandparents did for decades. As a result, they are more capitalistic, more individualistic, and more likely to take risks. Black and gray markets offer young people a very particular kind of education, and participating in them leads to a certain kind of savvy: in a society obsessed with rules, young North Koreans have learned how to skirt some of them.

Second, younger North Koreans see themselves as more self-reliant than their parents, because they don’t feel as though they’ve received much of value from their government. Partly for this reason, some North Korea experts see this younger generation as far less loyal to the state and its leadership. “These people are, compared to their parents, much more pragmatic; they are cynical, individualistic; they do not believe in the official ideology,” noted Andrei Lankov, a leading expert on North Korea, in a 2015 interview with the South Korean program *Arirang News*. “They mistrust the government. They are less fearful of the government compared to their parents.” Although young North Koreans continue to obey the laws and publicly respect the regime, young defectors frequently claim that behind closed doors, their friends back home frequently mock the country’s leadership.

SMUGGLING IN THE TRUTH

As North Koreans have developed a more accurate perception of their country and the world, many have begun to feel a profound sense of betrayal. That feeling, in turn, has fed a sense of distrust—one that could prove corrosive in a totalitarian state built around a fanatical cult of personality.

For any real political change to take place, however, such distrust would need to spur collective action—a big challenge, given the government’s ruthless prohibition of any group activity not expressly sanctioned by the authorities. The regime forbids the formation of unofficial student groups and sports teams. Without express permission, North Koreans are not allowed to host a social gathering late at night or stay overnight away from their hometown in another person’s home. The regime has also made it extremely difficult for North Koreans to trust one another by developing a massive network of neighborhood-level informants and offering rewards for exposing anyone who criticizes the government. Finally, the authorities have vastly improved their ability to monitor digital communications, making it extraordinarily difficult to send sensitive messages, much less organize.

Despite these challenges, anyone with an interest in reducing the threat that the Kim regime poses to its own people and to the rest of the world should find ways to support the distribution of foreign information and media in North Korea. Traditional diplomacy and sanctions have failed to push Kim toward political and economic reform and away from saber rattling and defiance. For decades, some of the world’s most persistent and skilled negotiators have sought to engage, entice, and coerce him, his father, and his grandfather. But nothing has worked. If major powers have undertaken covert actions to encourage a coup, those too have failed. Meanwhile, Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons now deter any overt attempts at regime change and the use of major military force.

If North Korea is going to change, it will have to change from within. Boosting the flow of outside information and cultural products may well be the single most sustainable and cost-effective way to encourage that. Governments, philanthropic groups, and individual donors interested in the future of North Korea should consider funding nongovernmental organizations in South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere that work to get digital technology and foreign media into the country. Especially important are efforts to get outside information into the hands of North Korean military officers, intellectuals, and political elites. Also of great value are projects by nongovernmental organizations to train North Korean defectors—who know the target audience quite well—to assist in collecting media products and getting them across the border.

Critics of such efforts claim that North Korean authorities will have little trouble cracking down if they come to believe that a line has been crossed and that too much illicit information is reaching the public. But this position is too dismissive of the intense thirst for foreign media that North Koreans have displayed. It is difficult to envision how the regime could sustainably ramp up its repression: if its harsh measures have not deterred people from seeking out and consuming banned media, it's hard to imagine what would. North Koreans have tasted forbidden fruit and have made it clear that they want more, risking severe punishment just to steal a glimpse of the outside world while hiding under the covers in a dark, locked room, hoping no one will find out.

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