



FRONTIERS OF CENSORSHIP

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# NORTH KOREA

INVESTIGATION REPORT - OCTOBER 2011

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR PRESS FREEDOM





Investigation by Benjamin Ismail

**A**t the start of 2011, North Korea asked all its embassies to appeal to foreign governments for food aid. In view of the increase in diplomatic tension since the torpedoing of the South Korean corvette Cheonan in March 2010 and the shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong in November 2010, the request was surprising and gave rise to all sorts of analysis and interpretation as to the situation in North Korea and the regime's strategy. Was it a desperate act prompted by mounting food shortages or a calculated move aimed at preparing the succession to Kim Jong-il? Although the information emerging from North Korea is no longer limited to the occasional snippet, it is still hard to assess the scale of the many changes taking place inside the country.

Reporters Without Borders visited the South Korean capital of Seoul in July 2011 to evaluate the level of media freedom and freedom of information in North Korea. A Reporters Without Borders representative met with human rights NGOs, Ministry of Unification officials and the staff of Seoul-based radio stations broadcasting to North Korea. He also met North Korean refugees and journalists in direct contact with North Koreans inside North Korea, who risk their lives to provide information about government repression, humanitarian conditions, the economic situation and daily life in their country. On the basis of their accounts and analyses, Reporters Without Borders has drawn up this assessment of the changes that have taken place in recent years in the North Korean media, the government's propaganda and its control of news and information.

# FLOW OF INFORMATION AND GOVERNMENT CONTROL

**K**ang Chul-hwan heads the North Korea Strategy Centre (NKSC), an NGO which, among other things, collects video footage of North Korea from North Koreans that cooperate with it. “Video has much more impact than any other medium,” he said. “We distribute video in South Korea so that the South Koreans can become aware of the problems in North Korea. It is very dangerous. North Koreans caught with video footage are executed on the spot.”

The photos and video collected by his organization are also used by Radio Free Asia, Voice of America and other foreign media. Its many projects include plans to train journalists working in North Korea in order to improve the quality of the information they obtain and increase their safety, as they are putting their lives at risk.

## FOREIGN MEDIA AND DISSIDENT JOURNALISTS

Gathering information in North Korea and getting it out of the country continue to be very dangerous activities. The arrests of Laura Ling and Euna Lee, two American journalists working for the California-based online television station Current TV, showed this. Detained by North Korean border guards at the Chinese border on 17 March 2009, they were sentenced to 12 years of “reeducation through work.” They were finally freed on 5 August 2009 as a result of negotiations led by former US President Bill Clinton.

According to the conservative South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo, they were not arrested by chance but in a deliberate operation by the North Korean Security Department, which it said has spies that monitor journalists who venture too close to the border.

Despite the close surveillance, more and more foreign journalists are actively seeking information about the regime. What their efforts have in common is direct cooperation with North Korean citizen journalists inside the country

and with intermediaries based in China. The Seoul-based radio stations run by North Korean refugees have networks of correspondents with whom they communicate by telephone across the Chinese border. As a result, Open Radio North Korea (ORNK), Radio Free Chosun (RFC), Free North Korea Radio (FNKR) and North Korean Reform Radio are able to provide their listeners inside North Korea not only with news of the outside world but also with news from inside their own country and information about their government’s activities.

Rimjin-gang, a North Korean magazine founded jointly by the Japanese journalist Ishimaru Jiro and a North Korean journalist who uses the pseudonym of Lee Jun, has been functioning in a similar manner since 2007 in Japan. Published every two months in Japanese and Korean, it uses information and photos obtained from a network of North Korean journalists.

The risk for these correspondents is increased by the fact that the authorities fear the social impact that could result from dissemination of their stories. Graffiti criticizing Kim Jong-il and Park Chung-hee, South Korea’s authoritarian ruler from 1962 to 1979, were discovered in Pyongyang in June 2011. “The regime recently stepped up surveillance and there has been an increase in repression,” a South Korean official said. “It is even being reported that the regime has set up a special anti-riot unit and has imported tear-gas and gas-masks to be ready for a mass resistance movement. If the outside world is unaware of social unrest, the North Koreans who stage protests could easily be executed.”

Violence was used to suppress a wave of protests following monetary reform in 2009 and around 50 executions took place. There have been more executions since then, indicating a possible increase in the level of discontent. “Previously, only those responsible for serious crimes were executed,” a South Korean official said. “But now common crimes may also be resulting in execution. This is a real deterioration in human rights.”



US JOURNALISTS LAURA LING AND EUNA LEE OF CALIFORNIA-BASED CURRENT TV WERE ARRESTED ON 17 MARCH 2009 AND WERE SENTENCED TO 12 YEARS IN PRISON BEFORE FINALLY BEING RELEASED ON 5 AUGUST 2009 - CREDIT : AFP

According to South Korean officials, a video-journalist was publicly executed after being caught in the act of filming in 2007. He was not named, but reports indicate that he was an employee of the Hana Electric company in the southeastern city of Wonsan. More public executions have been reported since then. On condition of anonymity, one news media said that one of its journalists had been detained by the police and that it was only because the police did not discover his links with Seoul that he avoided summary execution.

## MOBILE PHONES

It is therefore vital for media operating from abroad to be able to evaluate the threat that the regime poses and the risks being run by the journalists operating inside the country. To this end, mobile phones have been used for several years and have become indispensable.

Kim Young-hwan, a researcher with Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights (NKnet), estimates that there are currently around 500,000 to 700,000 mobile phones in North Korea. "There is just one official mobile phone network," he said. "It is a closed network, used only by the North Korean elite. We know little about it. At the

same time, North Koreans use a Chinese mobile phone network which is illegal for them. The signal's penetration varies, but it reaches up to 20 km beyond the border. This network is a very sensitive problem for the North Korean government."

Sources inside the country say the regime is cracking down much harder on use of mobile phones to connect to the Chinese network. Phone connections were blocked in Sinuiju, the North Korean border city opposite the Chinese city of Dandong. "Previously, people caught with a mobile phone would get off with a fine, but now possession of a phone has been upgraded to a much more serious crime," Kim Young-hwan said.

Mobile phones represent a major information gateway for the North Korean population, which uses them to communicate with Koreans living in China. Many of these Korean refugees live in regions near the North Korean border in very precarious conditions and under constant threat from the Chinese authorities. As well as jamming the mobile phone networks, the North Korean regime has established a system for monitoring calls made from North Korea. The expansion of mobile phones is limited by both the geographical constraints and the fact that mobile phone calls are prohibitively expensive for much of the North Korean population.

# SMUGGLING AND MARKETS

As a result, smuggling continues to be a significant method of transmitting information although several special units have been created to combat it, some of them by Kim Jong-un. One, known as "109 Group," consisting of police officers, soldiers and members of the National Security Agency, reportedly has the specific job of looking for contraband and randomly checking homes for the presence of foreign media. Border guards are also kept under surveillance as they are regarded as easily bribed. During their border inspections, these units are said to have the right to shoot on sight.

The government also watches people – officials or ordinary citizens – who visit China. Members of the National Security Agency or agents based in China spy on them in bars and restaurants looking for the least sign of "anti-socialist" behaviour. Anyone criticizing the regime or indulging in reprehensible activities such as using the Chinese Internet could be reported. Such efforts are only relatively effective, especially as some of the inspection units are temporary. But the raids and campaigns against smuggling have real dissuasive impact. The possibility of being shot or sent into internal exile and fear of prison and labour camps suffice to convince many "smugglers" to abandon their activities.

Unofficial street markets are much used by the population and are more and more widespread despite being illegal and despite the increased repression. It is estimated that there are about 300 such markets throughout North Korea. As places of exchange by definition, the markets are also important vehicles for the exchange of information and the circulation of imported media. "The regime's control seems to have weakened as regards the markets," a South Korean official said.

The population depends more and more on the markets as the functionality of the regime's hidebound distribution systems is increasingly limited. The markets may not meet a western definition of the term but they have the merit of existing and allowing an information exchange. Films and TV series from the South are clandestinely exchanged in the markets and are copied and distributed on DVDs and video CDs. Along the Chinese border and in the Kaesong industrial region near the South Korean border, where 47,000 North Koreans work, the population uses these markets to exchange contraband products.

The results are encouraging. Most young North Koreans in the big cities are said to have seen South Korean TV series. "The best-off sectors of the population, those who have good jobs, are tired of the regime's propaganda and want to see something interesting," an ORNK journalist said. "Sometimes the police carry out raids on the markets but even the policemen want to watch the series."



THE MARKETS FACILITATE THE FLOW OF INFORMATION. THE BETTER-OFF NORTH KOREANS ARE ABLE TO USE THE MARKETS TO BUY DVDS AND CDS, AND RADIO SETS FOR LISTENING TO SHORT-WAVE STATIONS - CREDIT : AFP



CREDIT : JOONGANG ILBO

# INFORMING NORTH KOREA

**“**It is through the middle classes and intellectuals that change will take place in North Korea,” said Kim Heung-kwang of North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity (NKIS). Launched in 2008, NKIS has several hundred members, most of them North Korean intellectuals who have fled to South Korea. It publishes and disseminates information for South Koreans and has been preparing to launch a Web radio station, Real NK, since October 2010.

“The diversification of media has resulted in a considerable increase in the flow of information to North Korea since 1999,” he said. “In the past, North Koreans were happy just to receive information but now they feel a real need for it. They seek more detailed information than what the propaganda media are giving them. Our contributors inside the country also ask us for recent Korean and American TV series, films and games.” The demand for CD and DVD players and computers is growing. “They hear about these films and series while listening to the radio stations broadcasting from Seoul, and they want to watch them.”

His organization also sends USB flash drives and DVDs across the border.

“It is very hard or impossible to know who will get the USB flash drives once they are in the country but they are probably people from the middle and upper classes.” When smugglers or final recipients are caught in possession of USB flash drives, they lie about their origin. USB flash drives of North Korean or Chinese origin or content would be much less problematic, and would result in just a fine or warning.

According to Kim Heung-kwang, North Koreans are placing more and more trust in information from abroad. Those who own a TV set and manage to remove its lock are able to receive foreign TV stations. In some regions, they even get to watch South Korean TV. Aside from printers, it is not illegal to own computer equipment. There are now an estimated 2 million computers in North Korea and

they are gradually becoming accessible to the general public. The cost of computers, especially since the monetary reform, is nonetheless limiting their spread.

NKIS also sends USB flash drives with political content – about democracy, human rights and civil liberties. Unlike the standard USB flash drives containing films or TV series, these so called “stealth USB” flash drives are targeted at North Korean dissidents, students and intellectuals. While it is very hard to know if these USB flash drives will reach their targets and will be copied, NKIS hopes that their content will “help people to think logically.” The organization has sent 247 USB flash drives of this kind since February 2010.



A PACKAGE SENT BY BALLOON FROM SOUTH KOREA OR FROM THE CHINESE SIDE OF THE BORDER BETWEEN CHINA AND NORTH KOREA. IT CONTAINS A RADIO SET, US DOLLARS, DVDS AND LEAFLETS - CREDIT: AFP

Kang Chul-hwan, who fled North Korea in 1992, agrees that the volume of information flowing between the two countries is growing. “The media content and programmes being sent on CDs, DVDs, USB flash drives and the like are having a significant impact,” he said. NKIS evaluates North Koreans’ preferences as regards content from abroad. It also works on strategies for delivering content into North Korea. With the help of Far East Asia Broadcasting Company (FEBC), an international network of Christian radio stations, it has managed to send more than ➤





리상이 실현되는 해 주체98(2009)년



조선화 《새로운 혁명적대고조의 봉화를 지피주시는 위대한 령도자 김정일동지》

THE KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY UNVEILS THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW STAMPS IN DECEMBER 2009. THE PAINTING'S MESSAGE HAS NOT EVOLVED FOR DECADES - CREDIT : AFP

## MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA SCARCELY CHANGING PROPAGANDA

The North Korean media may have evolved a great deal in terms of form, but they continue to be government propaganda tools, whether targeted at the domestic public or the international community. The way the propaganda functions is virtually the same as ever although there have been some minor changes to the jargon. It was decided at the end of 2004 to stop using the title of "Dear Leader" in reports about Kim Jong-il. "The North Korean leader is reportedly worried about getting too much praise," the Russian news agency Itar-Tass commented at the time.

Internationally, the media are tasked with rebutting critical columns by foreign commentators or investigative reporting by journalists who manage to visit North Korea or get help from North Koreans. As the government starts from the principle that its public has no right of access to news and information from outside the countries, the media's

primary job is to provide an uninterrupted defence of the regime and its leader.

The print media and radio and TV stations continue to proclaim the greatness of North Korean socialism, the late Eternal President Kim Il-sung and the current leader and secretary of the Workers' Party, Kim Jong-il. Using well-rehearsed rhetoric, the regime's media no longer hesitate to tackle the subject of media freedom and freedom of expression, especially when South Korea is concerned.

In March 2006, the Korean Central News Agency, the North's main news agency, condemned the treatment of journalists in South Korea, citing sexual advances by the secretary-general of the Grand National Party towards a woman reporter employed by the conservative daily Dong-A Ilbo. In May 2007, the KCNA carried a statement by the National Alliance for the Country's Reunification, a pro-North group based in South Korea, condemning >

➤ pro-North photographer and writer Ri Si U's arrest in South Korea under the National Security law.

Many dispatches have criticized this law for "violating freedom of thought and expression and media freedom." But the agency did not seem to care that it was contradicting itself when another dispatch used the old rhetoric from the 1950s to denounce the very concept of "freedom of thought" as a "hypocritical slogan aimed at suppressing progressive ideas and spreading the bourgeoisie's reactionary ideas."

The propaganda also continues to use photos and symbols to promote the regime's image domestically and internationally. To promote Kim Jong-il's status on the international stage, the regime tells the media to cover all of his contacts with foreign personalities. An ordinary photo of Kim posing with Bill Clinton has been transformed into a much-displayed status symbol. In 2009, the North Korean press never tired of telling the international community that Kim had been awarded the "2009 Peace Prize" by Nepal's Journalists' Association at a Kathmandu ceremony.

## TV AND RADIO, MORE REACH AND ENERGY

Only two of North Korea's four existing TV stations – Korean Central TV (KCTV) and Korean Educational and Cultural Network – broadcast throughout the country. Mansudae Television can be received only in the capital and Kae-song Television broadcasts to South Korea. The number of radio stations is put at about 40.

The technical resources available to propaganda have evolved a great deal. The quality of domestic broadcasting has improved and, internationally, satellite coverage has been extended to new countries. KCTV switched to using Thailand's Thaicom-5 satellite in October 2010. As a result, its programmes can now be received throughout Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Methods of blocking "foreign propaganda" and jamming foreign broadcasts have also been reinforced.

The regime began reorganizing its radio and TV broadcasting system in 2010 with the chief aim of decentralizing services previously based solely in Pyongyang and establishing TV and film studios in all the provinces. The Propaganda and Agitation Department, an offshoot of the Committee of the People's cultural bureau, is in charge of these changes. The production of short propaganda films has also been announced. Aimed at educating the public about appropriate everyday behaviour, these shorts will be screened in North Korea's cinemas and then broadcast on KCTV.

The propaganda modernization also concerns the Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS), North Korea's leading radio broadcasting network. As well as broadcast



ANTI-AMERICANISM CONTINUES TO BE DRUMMED INTO THE NORTH KOREAN POPULATION BY MEANS OF POSTERS WITH EXPLICIT SLOGANS. THIS ONE SAYS: "WHEREVER HE IS, THE PERSON WHO ATTACKS OUR HONOUR WILL NOT BE SPARED!" - CREDIT : AFP

nationally, KCBS is nowadays also relayed by satellite, together with KCTV, and by Voice of Korea, the regime's international radio station. Using high frequency and shortwave frequencies, Voice of Korea broadcasts KCNA dispatches and its own programmes praising Kim Jong-il in nine languages.



THE FIRST OFFICIAL TV IMAGE OF KIM JONG-UN, FILMED DURING THE 30TH CONFERENCE OF THE WORKERS' PARTY IN PYONGYANG ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2010. - CREDIT : AFP

re promoting the future leader's image abroad, the regime must first concentrate on legitimizing him in the eyes of the North Korean public and, above all, the increasingly influential armed forces.

Given that the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il personality cults have been waged for decades, the media's discretion about the

## PREPARING KIM JONG-UN'S SUCCESSION

The North Korean print media nowadays consist of a dozen newspapers and a score of periodicals, all based in Pyongyang. Although the propaganda follows the same rules in the print media as in the broadcast media, careful analysis of propaganda about the presumed future leader, Kim Jong-un, indicates a subtle change in strategy, above all in the print media.

In 2006, a few foreign media detected the first signs of preparations for the succession to Kim Jong-il, pointing out that KCNA's dispatches were mentioning Kim Jong-un, the leader's third son, with increasing frequency. Although Kim Jong-un has been regarded as the heir presumptive for the past two years, the subject is still debated. It is the continuing doubt about the succession that is indicative of a change of strategy in North Korea's propaganda. The campaigns carried out in the past to establish the authority of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il contrast with the relative silence of the propaganda mouthpieces on the subject of Kim Jong-un.

A South Korean official pointed to the fact that Kim Jong-un is only 28. His father and grandfather were always portrayed as "protecting fathers." It will be much harder to cast someone who is so young and inexperienced, and so little known, in this role. Some refugees who left North Korea before 2009 say they were unaware of his existence when they were still there. So it seems probable that, before

promoting the future leader's image abroad, the regime must first concentrate on legitimizing him in the eyes of the North Korean public and, above all, the increasingly influential armed forces.

Given that the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il personality cults have been waged for decades, the media's discretion about the successor is surprising. Several sources nonetheless report that the Kim Jong-un propaganda is gradually being established in the provincial towns and countryside, verbally and in writing, but for the time being far from foreign observers. Songs celebrating him have been composed. One was reportedly heard in farms and factories in 2009 and the national football team is said to have adopted it before the 2010 World Cup. Its title, "Pal Keol Um" (Footsteps), is indicative of a strategy of emphasizing Kim Jong-il's aura and the idea that the son just has to follow his father's footsteps to be a good leader. Since 2009, several media have mentioned the production of badges and posters showing Kim Jong-un but there has been no concrete evidence of this as yet.



KIM JONG-UN, HIS FATHER'S PRESUMPTIVE SUCCESSOR AS THE COUNTRY'S LEADER, IS BEING SEEN WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY AT HIS FATHER'S SIDE, ESPECIALLY AT IMPORTANT OFFICIAL EVENTS - CREDIT : AFP

One South Korean journalist was of the view that Kim Jong-un's succession has been beyond any doubt since his appointment as vice chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission in September 2010, one day after being prompted to army general.

The attacks on a South Korean naval vessel and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island are seen as manoeuvres designed to ensure the military elite's support and at the same time reinforce the future leader's curriculum. Kim Jong-un's presence beside his father in photos posted on the Chinese foreign ministry website in July 2011 supports the theory that the strategy being pursued is one of a progressive announcement of his succession.

## PROPAGANDA IN THE INTERNET ERA

It is on the Internet that the propaganda's modernization is most visible. Although the Internet's use continues to be restricted to a few Internet cafés in the capital and to hotels where foreigners stay, there has been an increase in North Korean media with an online presence. Newspapers such as Rodong Sinmun, the Party central committee's official mouthpiece, now has a website. KCNA's website, which has been upgraded several times, is now hosted in Pyongyang, a sign of the regime's growing interest in the Internet. The activities of the Korean Friendship Association, a major vehicle for exporting the regime's propaganda, take place online. The propaganda has even reached YouTube and Twitter, where accounts have been opened in the name of Uriminzokkiri. The Uriminzokkiri website, www.uriminzokkiri.com, which is operated by the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea, has been regarded as one of the regime's leading sites for years.

North Korea is an Internet black hole. Only the elite and intellectuals have Internet access and in fact most of them can only access a closely monitored Intranet. "So far the Internet evolution curve in North Korea is still flat and the prospects for future development are not any better," Kim Young-hwan said.

But Kim Jong-il's comments during a visit to Kim Il-sung University's new electronic library in April 2010 may be indicative of a growing desire to adapt to the digital era. In



READING ROOM IN THE GRAND PEOPLE'S STUDY HOUSE IN PYONGYANG. WITH NO INTERNET ACCESS, STUDENTS AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC CAN ONLY READ CONTENT THAT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE PROPAGANDA DEPARTMENT.E - CREDIT : AFP

a speech to the students and academics who now have access to digitalized socialist archives, he applauded the initiative as necessary in "the era of a knowledge-based economy."

Since the middle of the past decade, security concerns have prompted the regime to develop an "army" of hackers. According to NKIS founder and president Kim Heungkwang, North Korea recruits its hackers at an extremely tender age and sends young people with a gift for information technology to Pyongyang Technology University to develop their skills. In June 2011, a refugee reported the existence of a hacking centre in the Pyongyang suburb of Mangkyungdae. It could be the place from which the cyber-attacks on the websites of the Seoul-based radio stations are launched. It could also be responsible for the attacks that have repeatedly shut down several South Korean websites since the start of the year. ■

# CONCLUSION

**N**orth Korea has been ranked last or second from last in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index for nearly a decade. The media provide only sporadic coverage of domestic incidents such as the 2007 flooding in which hundreds died. They are under the regime’s total control even if we sometimes hear, for example, about the “tolerance” of the officials looking for “antisocialist” propaganda at the border. There has been no positive evolution in the official media in content and style and the way they organize the news. They continue to serve Kim Jong-il’s propaganda strategy.

Although the regime has stepped up repression, above all to prepare for the succession to Kim Jong-il and the centenary of Kim Il-sung’s birth in 2012, the authorities seem unable to contain the smuggling and trade in media products, which has been growing significantly. The flow of information broadcast by foreign news stations is also growing, as is the number of organizations sending multi-media equipment and content to the North. All those who support the North Koreans are being encouraged by the echoes from the North to redouble their efforts. The response is leading some specialists to think that change will come from within the North Korean population rather than the regime, which continues to be inflexible and hostile to any criticism. The growth of an underground economy and the permeability of the Sino-Korean border are two key factors for the prospect of a gradual opening-up in North Korea.

Since 2008 and the end of South Korea’s policy of opening towards the North, China has become Pyongyang’s leading economic partner and supplier. According to some specialists, as international sanctions have had little effect on the regime and the international community has been unable to negotiate conditions on its food aid, the North Korean economy’s integration into the Chinese economy is accentuating the role that China could play in the start of an opening in North Korea.

Although the party daily Rodong Sinmun recently recognized the country’s economic difficulties, the institutionalization of trade relations between North Korea and China

could lead to reinforced border controls and improved living standards for the Pyongyang elite at the expense of the rest of the population, which has so far benefitted in only a very limited way from the cross-border trade.

The possibility that Beijing will advocate economic liberalization in North Korea and accept its responsibilities as regards human rights remains slight. So too is the possibility the opening will be result of a decision by the North Korean regime.

The Associated Press announced in June that it had signed a series of accords with North Korea that will increase its access to the country. One of the accords allows the AP to establish a comprehensive news bureau in Pyongyang. Another accord makes the AP the exclusive distributor of KCNA’s video and photo archives. These extraordinary accords should nonetheless not be interpreted as a desire on the part of the regime for transparency.

Reporters Without Borders urges the international community and the South Korean government to support the activities of the South Korean NGOs and media that are broadcasting to the North Korean population. As an Inter-media poll carried out at the Sino-Korean border in 2009 found, the number of people listening to the Seoul-based radio stations is on the increase. They are playing a major role in providing the North Korean population with independent and objective news and information. ■

# **REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS**

**FOR PRESS FREEDOM**

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REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

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