

# Information access: A study of the potential for an information revolution in North Korea

Marc Harper

## Dalhousie University: School of Information Management

### Introduction

North Korea's Kim dictatorship has been exercising constant surveillance and information control on its citizens for over half a century in a nation where privacy and independent thoughts are almost impossible to maintain. The systematic dispensing of propaganda backed by the brute force administered to North Koreans who question government ideology suggest that the current regime should not feel threatened.

Methodical dispensation and collection of information has been so efficient that defectors sometimes maintain their belief of the Kim dynasty's fictional virtues and those who remain captive have great difficulty hiding their "thought crimes". However, growing amounts of information seeping in and out of the country are beginning to expose potential weaknesses.

The Arab Spring, which saw several citizen uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with the assistance of social media, has demonstrated that change can happen quickly and drastically despite the dominance of an oppressive administration. In the aftermath of these events, Kim Jong Il bolstered his information control to heights even beyond his usual standards.

Despite the increasingly creative channels that are being implemented to spread information like never before, the absence of open internet access to North Korean citizens still presents a harsh obstacle to overcome. But regardless of the regime's grip on power as well as their ability to neutralize contraband information, keeping their citizens completely in the dark has proven to be a difficult task in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Origin of the Current Regime

Over 100 years of extreme hardships.....

North Korea's grim 20<sup>th</sup> century timeline begins with Japanese occupation and transitions to the Kim Regime at the end of the Second World War.

1905: Japanese occupation of North Korea follows the Russo-Japanese War

1945: Kim Il Sung plays a minor role in the liberation of Korea from Japanese oppression which becomes greatly exaggerated in later years

1950-1953: The Korean War follows the division of the Korean peninsula. The northern half, under soviet communist control, fails to conquer the south after U.S. intervention. However, Kim Il Sung maintains power and North Korea proceeds to promote self-reliance and demonizes the U.S. through state-funded propaganda. Citizens are now forbidden to leave their country and strict information control policies are implemented

1980: Kim Jong Il is designated as his father's (Kim Il Sung) successor

1994: Kim Il Sung dies and Kim Jong Il assumes the dictatorship's lead role

2011: Kim Jong Il dies. His son, Kim Jong Un, inherits power of a regime widely reputed of violating human rights and ignoring nuclear arms sanctions

### Dispensing Information

The Kim regime uses a two step process to maintain power:

1. Information dissemination composed exclusively of state run media

2. Brute force and/or imprisonment administered to citizens who question government tenets or attempt to access or dispense outside information

North Korea's Kim dictatorship, despite its violation of human rights, follows a strategic logic which fundamentally influences people's everyday practices, beliefs, and activities.

*The revulsion people feel for the Kim regime, which has the blood of millions on its hands, should not obscure the strategic logic that its brutality follows*

### North Korea's Personality Cult

The Kim Regime relies heavily on creating a mythological status for its members.

**The dictatorship says:** → → → → → → → → → →  
Kim Jong Il was born on top of Mt. Paektu, a beloved Korean symbol

**Historians say:**  
Kim Jong Il was born in the Soviet Union during the second world war

**The dictatorship says:** → → → → → → → → → →  
Excerpt from (North) Korean Central News Agency: Kim Jong Il performed outstanding exploits as the defender of socialism and justice

**Amnesty International says:**  
Almost all of the human rights protections that international law has tried to set up are ignored

*Kim Jong Il spent \$1 billion to expand his father's Kumsusan Memorial Palace and add to his 35,000 statues (notably, the 65 foot bronze statues in Pyongyang)*



Voice of America: <http://www.voanews.com/content/north-korea-marks-birth-of-founder/1641377.html>

### They say.....



*The "Dear Leader" provides safety and happiness to North Korean children*

38 North: [http://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/500x305\\_214114.jpg](http://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/500x305_214114.jpg)

### The truth is.....



*North Korean children are often neglected while bronze statues of the Kims are erected*

Trocaire: Trocaire.org

### Collection of Information

Surveillance and collection of information come in many forms in North Korea.

-North Korean citizens are forced to attend mandatory meetings to improve their obedience to the Kim regime. Here, they must confess their faults and explain how they will better themselves in the future. Character flaws which need fixing include: *forgetting to salute the Kim family in the morning, having a crooked picture of the Kims on the wall, questioning Kim tenets etc.*

-Events such as the funerals of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are heavily monitored. Citizens without a look of deep sorrow risk being investigated and/or imprisoned.



The Atlantic: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/12/gulag-of-the-mind-why-north-koreans-cry-for-kim-jong-il/250419/>

### Results of Information Control

North Korea's combination of state controlled media and education system has an astounding effect on citizens' beliefs. Although force is needed to keep many North Koreans from revolting, the limited amount of citizens who are able to access outside information are sometimes surprised that the Kims are only human.

At times, defectors are bitter against prison guards and government officials but not against the Kim family.

*"He is still our Dear Leader.....when I hear about his on-the-spot guidance and eating humble meals, I believe he cares for the people"*

-North Korean defector reacting to the news of Kim Jong Il's stroke

### The Arab Spring

On the other side of the world from North Korea, the Arab Spring of early 2011 involved a set of citizen uprisings in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) which are widely believed to have been prompted by oppressive living conditions and fueled by tools such as Facebook, Twitter, text messaging etc.

Citizens were able to contact outside parties and local activists tweeted telephone numbers to journalists around the world so citizens could be contacted directly

Regimes imprisoned and tortured bloggers but attacks on Facebook to neutralize information were unsuccessful



Guardian Liberty Voice: <http://guardianlv.com/>

### Obstacles Against a "North Korean Spring"

In North Korea, the element of an oppressive regime is certainly present, however, the social media factor, which played a crucial role in the Arab Spring, is notably absent due to all media being state sponsored. It is estimated that only 4% of citizens have access to the internet and even that is heavily censored.

Even if citizens are able to access outside information, a population uprising is severely restricted by the brute military force of a regime which oppresses an uneducated and unarmed group of citizens which cannot use social media to mobilize.

### About the author



Marc Harper (pictured atop South Korea's Mount Seorak) is a graduate of Dalhousie University's Master of Library and Information Studies (2014). His three years as an English teacher in South Korea led him to take greater notice of information control and human rights violations in North Korea.

### Signs of Hope?

Despite maintaining a largely successful grip on information control for over half a century, the Kim regime is unable to neutralize every last piece of information.

In 2011, Kim Jong Il took measures beyond his usual standards to block news of the Arab Spring including:

-Sending tanks and troops to urban centers to prevent public gatherings

-Issuing a country-wide inventory of all computers, cell phones, flash drives among the elite population

-Removing dividers in restaurants to prevent clandestine meetings

-Threatening to fire artillery on offshore NGO balloons carrying news of the Arab Spring

Channels for contraband information to potentially enter and exit North Korea include:

-Mobile Devices: The Kim regime's own implementation of mobile phones were meant to strengthen power via propaganda. These have the potential to backfire and puncture the hermetically sealed information bubble. There are also an estimated 1000 phones smuggled in from China on prepaid SIM cards.

-Asia Press International: A news agency which once obtained and redistributed footage of malnourished children scavenging for food

-Free North Korea Radio: A medium founded by a North Korean defector which airs a program called "voices of the people" and features electronically distorted voices of North Korean citizens broadcast back into their own country

### Discussion

The year 2014 has seen worldwide attention brought to human rights violations which occur daily in North Korea via a report from the United Nations. This is in conjunction with the omnipresent threat of nuclear weapons which come from this enigmatic nation.

Despite this, even "experts" on North Korea are unable to fully understand the government's inner workings as well as their exact proximity to developing nuclear warheads.

What can be observed, is the fact that the North Korean Government has adapted its strategy nimbly. It now openly acknowledges information such as South Korea's prosperity. Neighbors to the south are labeled "foul whores of America who are the opposite of North Korean purity".

However, when news of the Arab Spring broke out, the Kim regime chose to go to great lengths to censor it as opposed to acknowledging it and manipulating it. Was Kim Jong Il's instinct telling him something about this information based threat?

Is the Kim Dynasty's authority safe or destined for catastrophe?



Press TV: <http://previous.presstv.ir>

Patriot Post: <http://image.patriotpost.us/2013-04-10-chronicle.jpg>

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