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

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 dispersion of propaganda backed by the brute force administered to North Koreans who question the regime’s ideology suggest that the current regime should not be trusted. Methodological dispensation and collection of information has been so efficient that defectors sometimes maintain their belief of the Kim dynasty’s fictional virtues and who those 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.

Over 100 years of extreme hardships…..
North Korea’s grim 20th 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 II Sung maintains power and North Korea proceeds to promote self-reliance and demozones the U.S. through state-sponsored propaganda. Citizens are now forbidden to leave their country and strict information control policies are implemented

1960: Kim Jong II is designated as his father’s (Kim Il Sung) successor

1994: Kim Jong II 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

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 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 revision 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.

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 allowing 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

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 brunt by the military force of a regime which oppresses an undisciplined 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.

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