

AN INTERVIEW WITH JIEUN BAEK

Unlocking the Black Box

Keys to Information Dissemination into North Korea

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North Korea ranks last in the world in the Democracy Index, with heavy restrictions on freedom of movement, speech, and assembly. Despite outside sanctions from the UN Security Council and diplomatic efforts to engage with the Kim regime, little progress has been made on denuclearization or improving the human rights situation in North Korea. NBR spoke with Jieun Baek to gain insight on information dissemination, an alternative tool that governments and NGOs could use to undermine the regime's information blockade and thus increase the space for change from within.

What is information dissemination, and why is it important for North Korea?

Information dissemination is a tool that has been around for hundreds of years to send information into other societies, both democratic and autocratic. In the twentieth century, it has been used in different contexts by different actors, from civil society to the military.

In the case of North Korea, information dissemination refers to the efforts of various actors, whether North Korean defectors, NGOs, religious organizations, or different government bodies, to collectively send information into the country. Some NGOs create and curate content to load onto USBs, which are then smuggled across the Sino–North Korean border for marketeers to sell on the black market.

The goal of these collective efforts is to expand the knowledge of the North Korean people, who have been under a very repressive and closed regime, and provide them with access to alternative sources of information. The regime has been distributing its official narrative, fabricated history, and false “facts” to its people since the state's inception. Though wider access to foreign media

may seem insignificant, it has had permanent, long-lasting effects on North Korean society.

First, access to foreign media has undermined the narrative that the North Korean state has propagated about the outside world. This really kick-starts the causal chain of people's thinking to ask, What else has the regime not been honest about? Why do we have to be so poor if other countries, including other Communist countries, seem to be much better off?

Second, there have been several social and cultural changes that foreign media has had on viewers inside

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North Korea, such as trying to imitate fashion trends and use South Korean slang. The undertone of these small changes is that South Korean people are not horrible and are even worth imitating. Small behavioral and cognitive shifts in the way that North Koreans view other people are crucial.

This is very important for the near and long term because as the people of North Korea learn more about the outside world, whether from political news, inaccessible books, or even entertainment, they can develop an alternative thinking to what the regime has taught them is the truth. I'm not arguing that alternative sources of information embody a monolithic truth, in contrast to North Korean state propaganda. However, it is essential for North Korean people to have access to this information so that they can come to their own conclusion about what they want to believe, or not believe.

This strategy could hopefully lead to some type of internal change in the country. If a lot of people learn about the outside world and become disillusioned with the information diet that they've been fed for the past seven decades, then perhaps they may want to exercise their grievances and pursue some kind of meaningful collective action.

How has the North Korean regime responded to this phenomenon?

The response has evolved over time. Information dissemination—sending information into North Korea, blasting broadcasts across the border, and requesting proposals for information projects among civil society—clearly upsets the regime.

Accessing, possessing, and circulating unauthorized information was criminalized under Kim Jong-il. During that time, there were a lot of anecdotes about people being swept away, heavily fined, and in some cases executed. When Kim Jong-un came into power in 2011, he cracked down on information crimes and penalized them even more heavily than his father did. In addition to physical deterrence, the regime has also responded by developing

much more sophisticated surveillance and censorship software that targets people's individual devices, such as computers and cell phones. North Korea appears to be learning from countries like China and Russia and is trying to develop its own apps and websites to reduce the demand for external online services and increase the demand for North Korean options, creating the illusion that people have more access to information and ideas. In reality, the regime is creating platforms where people can engage so that it can have more control over them.

Given this increased access to foreign information, do you see opportunities for social networks and civil movements to develop within North Korea? What are the long-term implications of information dissemination?

The phenomenon of grassroots marketization goes hand in hand with information initiatives. After the great famine in the 1990s, many North Koreans interacted with Chinese people to conduct business on a very small scale. Naturally, people were able to make comparisons between foreign products and those made in North Korea. In the early 2000s, however, as formalized efforts of information dissemination started to ramp up, many people began to have regular access to entertainment, such as Western radio and South Korean dramas.

Traditional versions of social networks through word of mouth are building partly due to information dissemination. People have movie-lending networks among trusted friends, and when it comes to business, people work together with other entrepreneurs inside North Korea to increase their profit margins.

I don't think civil movements, in terms of people collectively demanding certain expanded rights, will happen anytime soon in North Korea because the regime is just too repressive. However, such change is possible in the long term because if more people have access to information, think critically, and share their thoughts with each other, perhaps they can agree on making some type of collective demand to the regime.

While I do believe in the importance of information and media, we should not overestimate their power. In the end, the Kim regime wields incredible military strength over its people and possesses extremely organized mechanisms to punish and deter its citizens. I don't expect a Tahrir Square-style revolution in Pyongyang anytime soon. Instead, the idea is to help develop the social networks and expand the pool of risk-takers that is growing within North Korea.

How should information dissemination in North Korea play a role in the foreign policies of countries such as the United States, South Korea, and Japan? Could you provide some policy recommendations for how to use information dissemination?

Right now, North Korea is one of the most difficult policy challenges in the world. North Korean society is changing rapidly, but our policies have remained largely stagnant. I do commend the efforts of negotiators who have tried to freeze the country's proliferation program, but North Korea recently launched its second ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] and shows no signs of suspending its missile development. We need to explore alternative policy options because the status quo is unacceptable.

Information dissemination should play a critical role in these countries' foreign policy, despite resistance from the Kim regime, because it's one meaningful leverage point. If both nonstate actors and governments collectively ramp up their efforts on funding information dissemination, there could be a significant impact on North Korea. Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and other government-funded programs have been broadcast into North Korea for years. However, only a smattering of NGOs are willing to take on the enormous risks of broadcasting to North Korea, and at the end of the day they are dependent on small swaths of funding limiting their capabilities.

There are organizations run by North Korean defectors who engage in information campaigns, including Free North

Korea Radio, North Korea Intellectual Solidarity, North Korea Strategy Center, No Chain for North Korea, and North Korean Freedom Fighters. Other organizations that are run by both defectors and South Korean natives, such as the Unification Media Group in Seoul, share similar goals to send foreign information and media into North Korea. In addition, private initiatives exist across South Korea, China, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, and Canada for people to fundraise for and support missionaries, defectors, and other activists who work under the radar to conduct information campaigns without inviting media attention.

The beauty of these efforts today is that the barrier of entry to participating in international movements is so low. It's quite easy to support North Korean defector organizations by teaching, sharing information, and raising awareness about their activities.

For most of the world, North Korea remains a black box for information. How do you access reliable and accurate news about North Korea?

From an academic perspective, it's really important to triangulate data sources. Besides Western media, useful news sources include media organizations run by North Korean defectors, such as NK News and New Focus International; government reports; and initiatives from civil society such as Rimjintang Asia Press, run by Japanese journalist Jiro Ishimaru, and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, led by Greg Scarlatoiu.

Although differences among cities and regions are vast and anecdotes are not generalizable to an entire country, I also try to stay updated through my defector friends who still have family members in North Korea. Of course, it's important to take their testimonies with a grain of salt, because defectors are a select population of the country in terms of their risk appetite and background. Given that there is no perfect source of information about North Korea, it's important to read as widely as possible.

In response to the imprisonment and death of Otto Warmbier, the U.S. State Department recently banned travel by U.S. citizens to North Korea. Some argue that engaging North Korea through people-to-people mechanisms provides opportunities for mutual understanding. What are the advantages and disadvantages of information dissemination vis-à-vis direct exchange and contact?

As someone who has visited North Korea, I agree with the travel ban. While I do support humanitarian missions like the Eugene Bell Foundation, which delivers multidrug-resistant tuberculosis treatment to the North Korean people, the negative externalities of highly curated tours to North Korea, which have made up the majority of U.S. engagement, outweigh any benefits. When you think about who profits from these tours, the cost for the U.S. government to negotiate the release of hostages, and the limited interactions with North Korean people vetted by the regime, it is clear that tours are not a meaningful form of exchange.

Instead, there are over 40,000 defectors around the world who may no longer be citizens of North Korea but are still North Koreans at heart. I encourage everyone to listen to their stories, because these defectors are the only ones with accessible links to family and friends in the country. ♦

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