

BACKGROUND

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Improving Information Access in North Korea

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Abstract

For dissidents struggling against totalitarian regimes, information is one of the most powerful weapons they can wield. The power of outside information was made evident during the Cold War, as Western technology and media broadcasts helped undermine the East German state. Now, America and South Korea are waging a similar battle against the authoritarian regime in Pyongyang. However, penetrating the information firewall in North Korea requires additional steps from Washington and Seoul.

Each year, thousands of refugees flee the oppressive North Korean regime. Today, nearly 30,000 such defectors live in South Korea.¹ Their stories attest to the important role that access to outside information plays in refugees' decisions to seek freedom abroad.

But getting information into North Korea is no easy feat. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK's) information blockade ranges from instituting an internal internet server, to limitations on the number of accessible radio stations, to prohibitions on the type of books that can be read. Persons caught with a Bible, for example, or unapproved Western literature, often face consequences as severe as death.²

International efforts to penetrate the information firewall in North Korea have thus far focused primarily on radios, DVDs, and cell phones. However, new technology is offering more innovative ways to get information into North Korea.

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KEY POINTS

- Promoting democracy and access to information in North Korea is in both the strategic and humanitarian interests of the United States.
- There are three main ways to access outside information in North Korea: radio; electronic devices like USB drives, DVDs, CDs; and cell phones. Emerging technology presents opportunities to disseminate information in new ways that may improve information access in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- Access to information is a major factor in whether North Koreans decide to defect and seek freedom abroad.
- As demonstrated by the U.S. and its West German allies' efforts during the Cold War, technology and media can play a crucial role in undermining totalitarian regimes.
- The U.S. must incorporate new technology into its existing strategy to promote information access in North Korea.

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States. Therefore, the U.S. must incorporate new technology into its existing strategy to promote information access in North Korea.

Importance of Information Access in North Korea

North Korea is one of the most isolated countries in the world. Yet, North Koreans still have access to outside information. One report found 16 percent of North Koreans accessed computers, one-fourth of the population listened to radio broadcasts, and 42 percent of defectors reported access to DVD players.³

Access to media appears to be related to class status, or *songbun*. The elites of Pyongyang enjoy far greater access to information than the average citizen. There may be as many as 100,000 privately owned computers in North Korea, but there are an estimated two million government-owned computers, many of which elites in Pyongyang use.⁴ These elites can access the Intranet, a government-monitored form of the Internet, and some especially trusted elites enjoy full access to the Internet.⁵ Furthermore, if caught with sensitive information, or an illegal Chinese phone, elites can evade or mitigate their punishment by offering bribes⁶ or proving connection to a person of good standing.⁷

In contrast, average North Koreans caught with unapproved information face severe consequences. An information crackdown by leader Kim Jong-un in 2013 resulted in death sentences for anyone caught listening to South Korean dramas or music.⁸ Expressing disapproval for any part of the North Korean government can result in arrest and isolation in a political prison camp. The regime also maintains a policy of jailing up to three generations of a dissident's family—a measure that is designed to both punish offenders and terrorize potential dissenters. Other common consequences include heavy government monitoring, confiscation of assets, and temporary stints in prison camps.⁹

Positive Precedent for Information Dissemination

In order to understand the key role information plays in a refugee's decision to defect,¹⁰ one need only consider the experience of Germans during the Cold War.

Technology and media such as television and radio played a crucial role in German reunification.¹¹ For example, West German media inspired East Germans

to demand freedom and helped lay the foundation for the divided nation's eventual reunification. Despite East Germany's effort to block radio broadcasts, West Germany successfully broadcast games, music, and quizzes in addition to the traditional diet of news and weather.¹² The type of messaging used in Germany mattered, and data from radio broadcasting during the separation of East and West Germany can inform broadcasting into North Korea. For instance, according to Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor (RIAS) editor in chief Hans Jürgen Pickert, West German producers tried to be very objective and unbiased and did not want to make East Germans feel inferior.¹³ Such lessons could help ensure any messages broadcast into North Korea are equally successful.

Current Information Access

There are three main ways to access outside information in North Korea: radio; electronic devices like USB drives, DVDs, CDs; and cell phones. Emerging technology presents opportunities to disseminate information in new ways that may improve information access in the DPRK.

Radio. Radio broadcasts into North Korea may reach between one and three million people.¹⁴ The U.S. government's Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) transmits 10 hours of radio programs daily,¹⁵ while the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) fund radio broadcasts that run five hours per day, seven days a week.¹⁶ The BBG, VOA, and RFA broadcast stories about North Korean defectors, analyses of current events in North Korea, and economic and cultural programming.

South Korea's public broadcasting network, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), also runs complementary Korean radio broadcasts. KBS broadcasts on AM radio frequencies, which transmit messages more clearly and reach farther into North Korea than the shortwave and FM frequencies used by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).¹⁷ To advance broadcasting capabilities, South Korea's leading defector-run media organizations—Radio Free Chosun, Open Radio for North Korea, and Daily NK—formed a media conglomerate called Unification Media Group. However, NGO broadcasting faces challenges. The South Korean government states that it does not support NGO broadcast efforts or allow NGOs to access the AM radio broadcast waves because concerns about rising tensions on the Korean peninsula. In September 2015, Saenuri

Party representative Ha Tae Kyung proposed the bill “North Korea Private Broadcasting Production Aid.” The bill aims to allocate AM frequency and production funds to NGO-based broadcasting groups like Unification Media Group.¹⁸ However, the bill is yet to pass the National Assembly.

USBs, SDs, CDs, and DVDs. Activists have sent DVDs, radio sets, and USBs into North Korea. These groups, such as the North Korea Strategy Center, North Korea Intellectuals Solidarity, and Free North Korea, fill the storage media with foreign movies, music, and eBooks. As technology has developed, various devices, like illegal phones with SIM cards, and “Notel,” a small portable media player, serve as a window to the outside world. However, smuggling foreign media into North Korea relies on decidedly low-tech means—trucks, balloons, and hand delivery.

Cell Phones. In 2011, the Egyptian firm Orascom claimed to provide cell phone service to over 600,000 North Koreans.¹⁹ Intermedia reports, however, that 89 percent of their sample used phones only to call China for business or personal reasons.²⁰ North Korean authorities are more lenient toward business-related uses of cell phones. As such, Chinese cell phones have expanded communication lines between defectors and their families back home. This expansion not only allows North Koreans to gain international information, but it allows for an outflow of information that can aid NGO efforts. The risks associated with owning cell phones prevent defectors from making calls, so they wait for family members to initiate calls. Still, 81 percent of defectors have reported staying in contact with their friends and families through the use of cell phones.²¹

New Application of Technology. To find new methods of cross-border data penetration, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and programmers gathered at Hack North Korea, an event organized by the Human Rights Foundation (HRF).²² Some new ideas discussed at the event included the use of compact satellite dishes which are easily concealed and have the potential to receive signals from South Korean broadcasts, and smart balloons with a propeller and GPS unit for dropping leaflets, DVDs, and USBs more effectively. The HRF is looking for other ways to advance technologies that disrupt the DPRK’s information monopoly.

In addition to ideas generated at the HRF events, the use of Wi-Fi could prove an effective technology

to improve information access. Google’s executive chairman, Eric Schmidt, has warned North Korea of the dangers of a closed Internet.²³ Schmidt mentioned the risks associated with continued isolation and economic decline and urged the North Korean government to loosen its grip on access to the Internet. The North Korean people themselves have signaled an interest in Internet access. For example, in areas near to foreign embassies with Wi-Fi, real estate prices have increased as North Koreans seek access to outside information.²⁴

Next Steps

Congress took a positive step by passing the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enforcement Act (NKSPEA) in 2016. Section 301 of NKSPEA requires the President to report a plan for making unrestricted and inexpensive electronic mass communications available to the people of North Korea. Representative Matt Salmon (R-AZ) introduced the Distribution and Promotion of Rights and Knowledge (DPRK) Act (H.R. 4501) in mid-February to expand the BBG’s funding for RFA and VOA radio programs and increase the availability and distribution of sources of information inside North Korea through the use of new technologies such as USB drives, micro SD cards, audio players, video players, cell phones, Wi-Fi, Internet access, wireless telecommunications, and other electronic media.²⁵

The following additional steps should be taken to help increase North Koreans’ access to outside information:

- **Use grants appropriated under the 2004 North Korea Human Rights Act to invest in new technologies that improve information access in North Korea.** Ideas generated at Google and the HRF should be further explored and once developed, applied.
- **The U.S. government should encourage the South Korean government to grant NGOs access to AM frequencies.** South Korea should take the approach that the more information that gets into North Korea, the better. As such, Seoul should go beyond merely funding government broadcasts. At the very least, the government should not obstruct commendable NGO efforts to improve information access in the DPRK.

- **The U.S. and South Korea should evaluate radio messaging to ensure it is relevant to North Korean audiences.** Interviews with defectors reveal that (1) North Koreans have limited access to NGO broadcasts, but upon leaving North Korea they realized that NGO broadcasting was more relevant than government-run broadcasts; and (2) North Koreans prefer entertainment-oriented broadcasts to the analytical and often demeaning news broadcasts disseminated through government programming.

Improving access to information will help the people of North Korea and provide a means of influencing North Korea from the inside out. Indeed, as demonstrated by the U.S. and its West German allies' efforts during the Cold War, technology and media can play a crucial role in undermining totalitarian regimes. The U.S. and South Korea can, and should, do far more to advance such efforts.

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