



NORTH KOREA

FRONTIERS OF CENSORSHIP

INVESTIGATION REPORT - OCTOBRE 2011





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At 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.



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.

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 >

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, befo-

re 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

CONCLUSION

North 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. ■

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REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS is an international press freedom organisation. It monitors and reports violations of media freedom throughout the world. Reporters Without Borders analyses the information it obtains and uses press releases, letters, investigative reports and recommendations to alert public opinion to abuses against journalists and violations of free expression, and to put pressure on politicians and government officials.

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