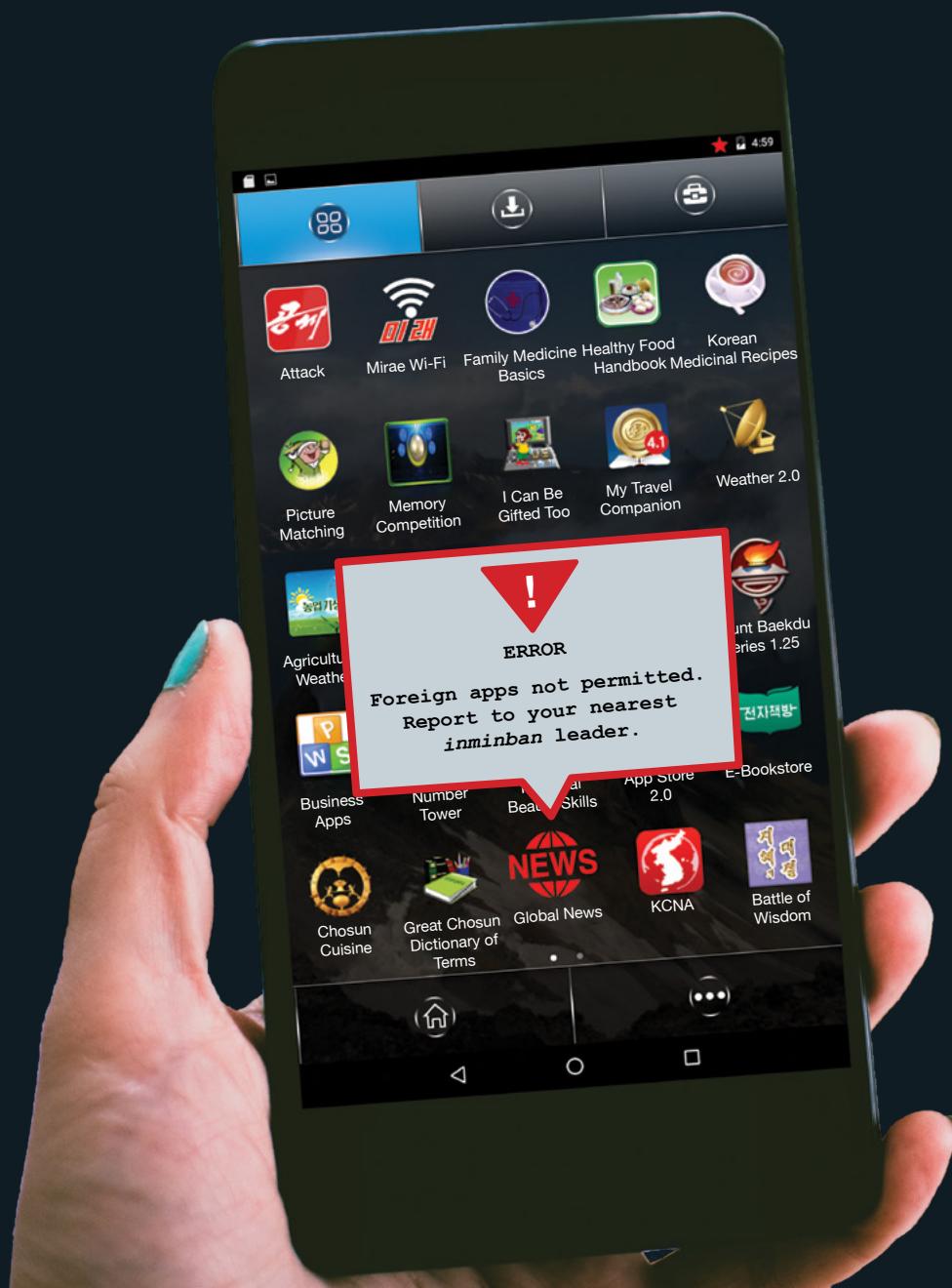


Martyn Williams



# DIGITAL TRENCHES

## North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive

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Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea .....	VI
About the Author: Martyn Williams.....	VI
Acknowledgments.....	VII
Acronyms.....	VII
Terms .....	VIII
Foreword.....	IX
Executive Summary .....	X
Section 1: Introduction .....	I
Report Methodology.....	I
Section 2: Legal Responses to the Influx of Foreign Media.....	2
The Letter of the Law in North Korea .....	2
Importing and Distribution of Decadent Culture.....	2
Conduct of Decadent Acts.....	3
Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping, or Distributing Enemy Propaganda .....	4
Illegal Crossing of Border .....	4
Violation of Publication Regulations.....	4
Section 3: Law Enforcement in Practice.....	6
Bribery.....	6
Distance from Pyongyang.....	7
The Power of Connections.....	8
Types of Content.....	8
Pornography .....	9
Public Trials and Executions .....	10
Section 4: Catching Offenders .....	11
Border Security .....	11
Street Inspections .....	12
House Raids .....	12
The <i>Inminban</i> .....	13
Section 5: North Korea's Security Organizations.....	15
Ministry of State Security.....	15
Ministry of People's Security .....	15
Bureau 15.....	15
Bureau 27.....	15
Group 109.....	16
Group 114.....	16
Group 118.....	16
Section 6: Ideological Responses to the Influx of Foreign Media .....	17
Total Control: The Propaganda and Agitation Department.....	17
The Third Broadcast Network .....	19
Daily and Weekly Meetings .....	20
Lectures .....	21
Self-criticism .....	22
Outdoor Media.....	22
Refreshing KCTV .....	23
Case Study: North Korean Television News Coverage of World News .....	25
Ideology from Birth .....	28
Section 7: Technical Responses to the Influx of Foreign Media .....	31
Preventing Foreign Radio and Television Reception .....	31
Cellular Networks .....	32
Domestic Networks.....	32
Cell Phone Use in the Border Areas.....	33
Technological Blocks on Smartphones and PCs.....	34
User Surveillance with Red Flag and Trace Viewer.....	35
File Watermarking .....	35
Digital Signatures .....	36
File Integrity Checks .....	37
WiFi.....	37
Section 8: Social Engineering as a Response.....	39
Smartphone Games .....	39
Internet Protocol Television Services .....	39
Section 9: North Korea's External Media.....	41
Voice of Korea .....	41
Magazines .....	41
Korean Central Television .....	41
Websites.....	42
Social Media.....	42
Foreign Eyes on Domestic Media .....	43
Section 10: Conclusion .....	44
Bibliography.....	45



# ABOUT THE COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) is the leading U.S.-based nonpartisan, non-governmental organization in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy, tasked to focus international attention on human rights abuses in that country. It is HRNK's mission to persistently remind policymakers, opinion leaders, and the general public that more than 20 million North Koreans need our attention. Since its establishment in October 2001, HRNK has played an important intellectual leadership role in North Korean human rights issues by publishing more than 40 major reports (available at <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>). Recent reports have addressed issues including the health and human rights of North Korean children, political prison camps, the dominant role that Pyongyang plays in North Korea's political system, North Korea's state sponsorship of terrorism, the role of illicit activities in the North Korean economy, the structure of the internal security apparatus, the *songbun* social classification system, and the abduction of South Korean and foreign citizens. HRNK is the first and only non-governmental organization that solely focuses on North Korean human rights issues to receive consultative status at the United Nations (UN). It was also the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly and actively involved in all stages of the process supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights. Its reports have been cited numerous times in the report of the COI, the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights, a report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a report of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and several U.S. Department of State Democratic People's Republic of Korea Human Rights Reports. HRNK has also regularly been invited to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MARTYN WILLIAMS

Martyn Williams is a journalist and analyst who has been following North Korean information technology and media for more than 20 years. In 2008 he started the North Korea Tech website to catalog and report on the country's slow adoption of modern Internet, cellular, and digital communications technology. He is regularly interviewed and quoted by major media outlets on the subjects of North Korea's use and adoption of technology and its use of propaganda against its people. He also speaks at conferences on the same subjects. Mr. Williams has been based in the San Francisco Bay Area since 2011 and was previously based in Tokyo, Japan, for 16 years.



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# ACRONYMS

ATSC	Advanced Television Systems Committee
CBC	Central Broadcasting Committee
COI	Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
DSL	Digital Subscriber Line
DTMB	Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast
DVB-T2	Digital Video Broadcasting - Second Generation Terrestrial
DVD	Digital Versatile Disc
GPS	Global Positioning System
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
HRNK	Committee for Human Rights in North Korea
IMEI	International Mobile Equipment Identity
IMSI	International Mobile Subscriber Identity
IPTV	Internet Protocol Television
IT	Information Technology
KCBS	Korean Central Broadcasting Station
KCNA	Korean Central News Agency
KCTU	(South) Korean Confederation of Trade Unions
KCTV	Korean Central Television
KPTC	Korea Posts and Telecommunications Corporation
KWP	Korean Workers' Party
LED	Light-Emitting Diode
MPS	Ministry of Public Security
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NIST	U.S. National Institute for Standards and Technology
OGD	Organization and Guidance Department
OHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PAD	Propaganda and Agitation Department
PBS	Pyongyang Broadcasting Station
PC	Personal Computer
RSA	Rivest–Shamir–Adleman
SD	Secure Digital
SIM	Subscriber Identification Module
TPMI	Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology
TV	Television
UN	United Nations
USB	Universal Serial Bus
VHS	Video Home System

# TERMS

<i>Bo-wi-bu</i> (보위부) or (국가안전보위부)	Ministry of State Security
<i>Inminban</i> (인민반)	Neighborhood watch unit
<i>In-min Bo-an-bu</i> (인민보안부)/ <i>An-jeon-bu</i> (안전부)	Ministry of People's Security
<i>Juche</i> (주체)	Self-reliance
<i>Ku-ryu-jang</i> (구류장)	Short-term detention center
<i>Kwan-li-so</i> (관리소)	Political prison camp
<i>Kyo-hwa-so</i> (교화소)	Re-education through labor camp
<i>Naengmyeon</i> (랭면)	Cold noodles
<i>Ro-dong-dan-ryun-dae</i> (노동단련대)	Mobile labor brigade
<i>Ro-dong-dan-ryun-hyung</i> (로동단련형)	Short-term labor
<i>Ro-dong-gyo-hwa-hyung</i> (로동단련형)	Reform through labor
<i>Saenghwal chonghwa</i> (생활총화)	Self-criticism session
<i>Songbun</i> (성분)	Socio-political classification
<i>Teuk-byul-gyung-bi-ju-gan</i> (특별경비주간)	Special inspection week

# FOREWORD

The watershed February 2014 Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea recommended that North Korea "allow the establishment of independent newspapers and other media; allow citizens to freely access the Internet, social media, international communications, foreign broadcasts and publications, including the popular culture of other countries; and abolish compulsory participation in mass organizations and indoctrination sessions."

Almost six years later, the Kim Jong-un regime continues to crack down on information from the outside world and punish those who attempt to access it. The regime endeavors to ensure that its people receive only the information most beneficial to the Kim family from its official propaganda arm. The regime pushes messages to audiences outside North Korea for its own political, security, and monetary gain. Repeatedly, we are witnesses to the disparity between escapees' stories of torture and abuse at the hands of the regime and the regime's self-portrayal before the international community and media as a "workers' paradise" victimized by the United States.

In *Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive*, Martyn Williams explains how the Kim Jong-un regime has been reacting to increased information infiltration from the outside world. Williams' rigorously researched report focuses on three fundamental aspects of North Korea's information counter-offensive: 1) the way technology is used to counter information from the outside world; 2) the way content produced by the regime's propaganda organizations aims to counter information from the outside world; and 3) the way North Korea's laws and legal system as well as extra-judicial punishment are applied to punish those caught while distributing smuggled content from the outside world or while accessing such information. The report goes further to examine both the technical aspects of North Korea's dissemination of propaganda to foreign audiences and the content of such propaganda.

Regardless of the outcome of multiple rounds of summit diplomacy with the Kim regime, the human rights and human security status quo of North Korea is unacceptable. True change, ideally peaceful, can only come from the people of North Korea. Information campaigns are an effective tool that the international community can employ to empower the people of North Korea through access to the knowledge denied to them by their rulers. The people of North Korea need access to three basic stories in particular: 1) the story of the corruption of their leadership, especially the inner core of the Kim family; 2) the story of the outside world, especially free, democratic, and prosperous South Korea; and 3) the story of their own human rights, to which they are entitled through international instruments North Korea has ratified or acceded to and through North Korea's own legislation, including its Constitution.

It will take commitment, resources, patience, and resilience to expand and improve information campaigns for North Koreans. Understanding how the Kim regime endeavors to preserve its information firewall to prevent outside content from entering the country; how North Koreans obtain such information despite overwhelming control, coercion, surveillance, and punishment; and how the Kim regime distorts the truth to sanitize its image before the world will provide a critical foundation for more effective information campaigns in the future.

Williams' report will provide vital information to policy and decision makers, and to action-oriented civil society organizations in order to propose, promote, and sustain constructive efforts to bring human rights and freedom to the people of North Korea.

Any practical agenda to improve human rights in North Korea through information campaigns must be grounded in a thorough understanding of North Korea's information environment and its relationship with the regime's deliberate policy of human rights denial.

Greg Scarlatoiu  
Executive Director  
December 18, 2019

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Can a USB stick make Kim Jong-un afraid?

What happens when a state responds to the influx of foreign information, deemed illegal, within its borders?

Renowned journalist and North Korea tech expert, Martyn Williams, examines these questions and more with the aim to increase awareness of North Korea's propaganda operations and counter-information techniques. His report for HRNK, *Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive*, is a fresh look at the Kim regime's information operations from both technical and human rights perspectives.

While North Korea remains the most restricted media environment in the world and violates its citizens' fundamental human right to information, Williams delves into the technicalities of keeping people cut off from the world's digital network.

**Section 1** of *Digital Trenches* sets the scene to answer two broader questions:

- (1) How does North Korea use its own technology to counter outside information?
- (2) What propaganda does the regime produce to offset the increasing consumption of foreign information among North Koreans domestically?

To answer these questions, Williams relied on the insights of 40 former North Koreans who agreed to be interviewed for this report in Seoul in 2019. With the assistance of HRNK's Executive Director Greg Scarlatoiu and Director and Founder of No Chain for North Korea Jung Gwang-il, a former political prisoner in North Korea, the author interviewed witnesses and analyzed the data provided. Other experts on North Korea were consulted and interviewed as well. Until North Korea opens its borders, reports such as this one will continue to rely heavily on information from North Koreans who risked their lives to escape North Korea.

**Section 2** takes a look at the letter of the law in North Korea as it relates to foreign information and crossing the North Korean border. Williams provides applicable North Korea Criminal Code articles and analyzes the differences in the last three known revisions of the code (2009, 2012, and 2015). He reviews the prescribed penalties and pairs them with interview data to determine the stated law versus the reality on the ground in meting out punishments. Escapees discuss a range of responses from the Kim regime for possessing foreign media, including non-judicial punishment in certain circumstances and severe punishment in other cases. These laws and responses are all intended to control and limit the con-

sumption of media and information that is deemed a threat to Kim Jong-un's rule.

**Section 3** provides a better look at the implementation of North Korean law and guidance from Kim Jong-un to restrict information flow. This section presents issues the regime is grappling with as it continues to try to control a society with a thirst for new information and content, including pornography. Williams highlights Pyongyang's severe attitude towards pornography and what this means for those willing to sell and purchase this type of content, which is seen as anti-regime. As *Digital Trenches* details, public executions continue to be a tool used by the regime to keep its population under control.

**Section 4** describes the vast border security and inspections tied to preventing uncensored information from entering into North Korean society and also to rounding up suspicious content. Mr. Williams weaves escapee testimony into a helpful understanding of border security, street inspections, and house raids. The ever-watchful eye of the *inminban* (neighborhood watch unit) and its role are also reviewed, as the *inminban* continues to be important to monitoring and reporting on neighbors' every move.

**Section 5** outlines the Kim regime's security apparatus, including the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security, Bureaus 15 and 27, Groups 109 and 119, and several others mentioned by escapees, about which little is known. Without question, the State security and its operations to defend and protect the Kim family against the influx of foreign information is apparent through the deployment of these State-run organizations designed to control the North Korean population.

**Section 6** covers North Korea's ideological responses to the influx of foreign media. Section 6 details the Propaganda and Agitation Department's role in shaping ideology as well as an interesting discussion of the little known "third broadcast network," whereby the Kim regime has a direct line into the homes of its citizens to push its ideology. Williams also looks at outdoor media and changes to Korean Central Television over the years attempting to modernize its content and aesthetics. Finally, Williams highlights North Korean television news coverage over a one-year period to give a glimpse into the content and messages that North Korea televises.

**Section 7** is a current view of the technology North Korea uses to fight the influx of foreign media and also monitor and control its people. Williams delivers an expert overview of North Korea's attempts to prevent information flow, including foreign radio and television broadcast into the country as well as the cellular networks used by North Koreans domestically along the border. North Korea's technical blocks on smartphones and personal computers, user surveillance with Red Star and Trace Viewer, file watermarking, digital signatures, file integrity checks, and WiFi networks are all discussed. This section of *Digital Trenches* brings a technical update to the world's understanding of North Korea's technological advancements, ultimately used to control people.



**Section 8** expands on technology to control in what Williams deems “social engineering” as a response to the influx of information in North Korea today. *Digital Trenches* reviews North Korea’s use of smartphone games, new television programs, and Internet protocol services, to attempt to keep North Koreans occupied with the information provided by the State.

**Section 9** gives a current overview of North Korea’s use of information to shape the information environment for foreign audiences as well as for domestic consumption at times. In addition, Mr. Williams examines North Korea’s peculiar use of Twitter.

**Section 10** leaves us with not only a conclusion, but also more of a continuation in that the use of technology in North Korea is ever-changing and adapting to the influx of foreign content.

While there is evidence of the increased penetration of outside information, and perhaps a degradation of ideology among everyday North Koreans, Williams reminds us that it would be a mistake to believe that the Kim regime is now more amenable to foreign information. In fact, *Digital Trenches* is a warning that the Kim regime is fighting the information influx with modern technology. In the future, North Korea may grow more adept at monitoring, controlling, and ultimately punishing its people for the threat posed to the regime by information from the outside world.

# SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The digitization of electronics and communications technology has been a catalyst for the spread of foreign content inside North Korea. It began in the early 2000s when Video CDs started to replace bulky analog VHS cassettes and continues today with microSD cards that are no bigger than a fingernail. Digital media has made it easier and cheaper to smuggle, distribute, consume, and copy illicit content.

North Korea has always battled against this inward flow of news and entertainment, but it stepped up a notch after the ascent of Kim Jong-un (김정은) in 2011. Increasingly, the regime is turning to digital tools to fight modern technology, including subverting open technology, such as Android, to serve its means.

Parallel to the new digital fight, North Korea continues to condition its citizens' minds with a centrally-controlled and programmed diet of propaganda. But in this area, the State has shown an inability to innovate and the methods and stories being used have not changed much from two or three decades ago.

Such a recipe might lead to widespread discontent in many countries, but in North Korea the powerful and ruthless State security agencies continue to weed out "problematic" citizens, including through execution, and to hand down other punishments, although in recent years, bribery has become increasingly accepted as a way out of minor crimes.

In this report, the three main ways North Korea is reacting to the inflow of information will be analyzed: 1) through the State-controlled legal regime, including arrests and punishment; 2) through advanced technology, including surveillance and censorship on digital devices; and 3) through propaganda, including constant ideological messaging to citizens. The apparent social engineering which the regime is attempting will also be covered, as will the reasons why the regime believes it is imperative to succeed.

## Report Methodology

This report is based on in-person interviews with 41 North Korean escapees conducted in Seoul, South Korea in February and March by the author, and in August 2019 by HRNK Executive Director Greg Scarlatoiu. The interviews were done in close collaboration with Mr. Jung Gwang-il, President and Founder of No Chain for North Korea, and all interviewees were guaranteed anonymity so they had complete freedom to speak.

The escapees represent a cross-section of ages and jobs. A total of 19 were female and 22 were male. About half escaped in the

2010s with others escaping earlier. They included students, factory workers, administrative workers, and those in the military.

The majority came from North Hamgyong province, which has the largest number of North Korean escapees. Some were from Pyongyang, Ryanggang, and North Pyongan provinces.

The report also draws upon previously published works, research, and the author's own database of news articles and North Korean materials. Citations are included throughout.

The case study on North Korean television news is based on the author's library of daily North Korean television footage.

## SECTION 2: LEGAL RESPONSES TO THE INFLUX OF FOREIGN MEDIA

Smuggling, distribution, and consumption of foreign media are covered by several articles of North Korea's Criminal Code and enforced by several arms of the State security apparatus.

The penalties can range up to ten years in a labor camp, but in reality, the situation is far more complicated.

North Korean escapees report that the severity of punishment will vary based on the nature of the content in question and the amount of content involved, but even then, the current political or domestic security climate will affect the leniency or severity with which one is judged. The result is that citizens can expect anything from a slap on the wrist to execution if they are caught with foreign content. However, as discussed below, the death penalty is not a prescribed punishment under the applicable North Korean Criminal Code articles listed below (although it is applicable for certain crimes based on a 2010 addendum to the code). Effectively, this means the regime governs based less on the rule of law and more based on other factors, typically regarding the desires of the *Suryong* (Supreme Leader) Kim Jong-un.

However, despite the penalties spelled out in North Korea's Criminal Code, the authorities are increasingly open to bribes that allow citizens to avoid being charged in the first place. In some cases, escapees said, it appears as though raids are carried out with the specific intention of eliciting bribes.

### The Letter of the Law in North Korea

North Korean laws concerning foreign content and smuggling have evolved over the last two decades as the regime has stepped up its fight against foreign media and the amount of foreign media coming into the country has risen. In general, the penalties spelled out in the law have been decreased for small offenses while being increased for more serious offenses. In most cases, an additional penalty has been added where the crime has been committed repeatedly.<sup>1</sup>

"If you get caught while watching South Korean or American contents then theoretically you have to get severely punished. But because there were so many people watching this content, the punishment has been reduced."

(Escapee 26)

Through an analysis of the North Korean Criminal Code from 2009, 2012, and 2015, it appears that the regime is focusing efforts in two areas: 1) smugglers and distributors rather than everyday North Koreans, and 2) content with the ability to destabilize the country rather than everyday dramas and movies.

This is not to say that getting caught with foreign content is no longer a serious issue—offenders caught can still face up to a year in a labor camp under the law, but that is a reduction from previous sentences of up to two years.

For the most serious offenses, the penalties have moved in the opposite direction. In 2009, the maximum specified sentence was five years of labor, but in 2015, it was revised to ten years.

There are non-judicial punishments too.

College kids get expelled from schools. For middle school students, they call their parents. If the content is deemed severe and dangerous then they might get sent to the labor camp or in the worst-case to a prison camp, but nowadays they don't really send people to prison camps.

(Escapee 26)

The three main articles that concern foreign content are Articles 183, 184, and 185 in the 2012 and 2015 revisions of the Criminal Code (renumbered from 193, 194, and 195 in the 2009 Criminal Code).

Collectively, the regime criminalizes everything to do with media that is not produced by the North Korean State and approved by the Korean Workers' Party (KWP).

### Importing and Distribution of Decadent Culture

#### **Article 193 (2009) – Importing, Keeping and Distribution of Decadent Culture**

A person who, without authorization, imports, makes, distributes or illegally keeps music, dance, drawings, photos, books, video recordings or electronic media that reflects decadent, carnal or foul contents shall be punished by short-term labor for less than two years. In cases where the person commits a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

In cases where such a person imports, keeps or distributes sexual video recordings, the punishment shall be reform through labor for more than five years and less than ten years.

I HRNK translations of the 2009, 2012, and 2015 revisions of the North Korean Criminal Code.



### **Article 183 (2012) - Importing and Distribution of Decadent Culture**

A person who, without authorization, imports, makes, distributes or illegally keeps drawings, photos, books, video recordings or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal or foul contents shall be punished by short-term labor for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

### **Article 183 (2015) - Importing and Distribution of Decadent Culture**

A person who, without authorization, imports, creates, distributes, or illegally keeps drawings, photos, books, or electronic content like video recordings which contain decadent, carnal or foul contents shall be punished by labor training for less than one year. If one imports, creates, or keeps such content frequently or in large quantity, one shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

In cases when the gravity of the nature of the acts specified in the immediate foregoing act is severe, one shall be punished by reform through labor for five years or more, but not more than ten years.

Article 183 saw a major revision in 2012 when, in addition to being renumbered, the maximum penalty for the lowest level of offense was reduced from two years to one year of short-term labor.

It also saw the deletion of a specification for sexually-explicit content. Previously, this had been the most serious offense under the law and carried the highest penalty of between five and ten years of reform through labor, but in 2012, it was removed completely. The result was that the maximum penalty was five years in a labor camp and applied to “grave” offenses.

In 2015, the law was further revised with the introduction of a new level of crime: where there was a large quantity of material or frequent importation, creation, or possession of material. Both “large” and “frequently” are not defined in the Criminal Code, leaving some latitude for judges.

It also saw the return of the five to ten-year sentence, this time for anything judged “severe.” This undefined group likely includes sexual content and now encompasses a wider range of content, including anti-State material that directly attacks the North Korean system, State, and leadership.

## Conduct of Decadent Acts

### **Article 194 (2009) – Conduct of Decadent Acts**

A person who watches or listens to music, dance, drawings, photos, books, video recordings or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal or foul contents or who performs such acts himself or herself shall be punished by short-term labor for less than two years. In cases where the person commits a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

### **Article 184 (2012) – Conduct of Decadent Acts**

A person who looks at drawings, photos, and books or listens to video recordings or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents or who performs such acts himself or herself shall be punished by short-term labor for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than two years.

### **Article 184 (2015) – Conduct of Decadent Acts**

A person who looks at drawings, photos, books, listens to or watches songs, or movies that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents or who reenacts or reproduces such acts shall be punished by labor training for less than one year. If the acts addressed/specify in the immediate foregoing paragraph are repeatedly conducted, one shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years. In cases when the gravity of the nature of the immediate foregoing act is severe, one shall be punished by reform through labor for five years or more but no more than ten years.

Like the article before it, the 2012 revision of this law saw the sentence for the lowest-level crime reduced to up to one year in a short-term labor camp. The penalty for grave offenses was also reduced from five years to two years and there was a slight change in the content list with the removal of music and dance.

The 2015 update saw the reintroduction of songs on the content list and a new level of crime. A sentence of up to five years in a labor camp could now be applied to anyone who repeatedly broke the law. And like Article 183, the 2015 update introduced a higher penalty of five to ten years for “severe” offenses.

## Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping or Distributing Enemy Propaganda

### **Article 195 (2009) - Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping or Distributing Enemy Propaganda**

A person who, without anti-state motives, listens to a broadcasting that is hostile to the Republic, or collects, keeps or distributes enemy propaganda shall be punished by short-term labor for less than two years. In cases where the person commits a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

### **Article 185 (2012) - Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping or Distributing Enemy Propaganda**

A person who, without anti-state motives, listens to an enemy's broadcasting or collects, keeps or distributes enemy propaganda, shall be punished by short-term labor for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

### **Article 185 (2015) - Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping or Distributing Enemy Propaganda**

A person who, without anti-state motives, listens to an enemy's broadcasting or collects, keeps or distributes the enemy's content/material, shall be punished through labor training for less than one year. If one frequently conducts the acts addressed/specify in the immediate foregoing paragraph or if one collects, stores, or distributes large quantities of the enemy's content/material, one shall be punished through reform by labor for less than 5 years. In cases when the gravity of the nature of the immediate foregoing act is severe, one shall be punished through reform through labor for five or more years but no more than ten years.

As in the previous articles, the 2012 revision reduced the maximum sentence for the lowest-level offense to one year in a labor camp. It also tweaked the description of the content covered, choosing to target "enemy broadcasting" rather than "broadcasting that is hostile to the Republic." This slight change places more emphasis on the source of the programming rather than on the content and covers any reception of television or radio from at least South Korea and the United States.

The 2015 version of the law further tweaks and widens this to cover the collection, keeping, or distribution of enemy content and material rather than specifically mentioning propaganda. As with

previous articles, it adds a new level of crime that delivers up to five years in a labor camp for anyone that does this frequently. The maximum penalty has also been raised to between five and ten years for "severe" acts.

## Illegal Crossing of Border

### **Article 233 (2009) – Illegal Crossing of Border**

A person who illegally crosses a border of the Republic shall be punished by short-term labor for less than two years. In cases where the person commits a grave offence, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

### **Article 221 (2012 and 2015) – Illegal Crossing of Border**

A person who illegally crosses the state border shall be punished by short-term labor for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than five years.

Article 221 covers illegal border crossings, which is an additional offense of which many smugglers will be guilty. Here, the penalty for a single offense was reduced from two years to one year in 2012, while that for a grave offense remained the same at five years.

As part of the 2012 revision of the Criminal Code, a second article that dealt with assisting illegal border crossing was eliminated. Article 234 (2009) had applied penalties of up to five years of labor for those assisting someone to cross a border.

### **Article 234 (2009) - Assisting Illegal Crossing of Border**

A worker in the border administration sector who assists someone to cross a border shall be punished by reform through labor for less than two years. In cases where the foregoing act is committed repeatedly or in exchange for money or goods, the punishment shall be reform through labor for less than five years.

## Violation of Publication Regulations

### **Article 226 (2009) - Violation of Publication Regulations**

A person who, in violation of the regulations for publication, prints, publishes or distributes publications, types or copies them, or violates the regulations for production and distribution of electronic media, thereby causing serious consequences, shall be punished by short-term labor for less than two years. In cases where the

person commits a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labor for less than three years.

**Article 214 (2012 and 2015) - Violation of Publication Regulations**

A person who, in violation of the regulations for publication, prints, publishes or distributes publications, types or copies them, or violates the regulations for production and distribution of electronic media, thereby causing serious consequences, shall be punished by short-term labor for less than one year.

Article 214 bans all private publications and covers duplication and distribution of any material not sanctioned by the State.

In common with other offenses noted above, the sentence for the lowest-level crime was reduced to one year in a labor camp with its 2012 revision. At the same time, a clause that allowed up to three years in a labor camp for grave offenses was deleted.

Unlike the other articles highlighted here, the article has not seen the introduction of a sentence for repeatedly breaking the law or the reintroduction in 2015 of a harsher penalty for a more serious version of the offense.

## SECTION 3: LAW ENFORCEMENT IN PRACTICE

While the North Korean Criminal Code spells out specific punishments for specific crimes, the true state of affairs in 2019 is much less black and white.

The mass of foreign content that has entered the country from the mid-2000s onwards has led to a curtailing of hard sentences for all but the most serious crimes, as can be seen in the Criminal Code changes outlined above. A much bigger change is that bribery is rampant, especially at the lower levels in the security forces, and North Koreans are increasingly reporting that payments help them avoid any punishments for smaller offenses.

Social class also plays an important role in whether someone is routinely targeted and several escapees said local law enforcement would regularly warn of impending crackdowns by provincial-level authorities.

For many North Koreans, the basic penalty for being caught with illicit foreign content—if a bribe does not work—is a period in a *ro-dong-dan-ryeon-dae* (노동단련대) mobile labor brigade. In these brigades, offenders are housed in camps and moved around the province or country to take part in whatever work the regime needs done, such as road construction and repair or logging.

Many of these sentences are the result of an arrest by local police officers, who are under the Ministry of People's Security (MPS).

More serious crimes, such as those involving anti-regime content or pornography are handled by the feared Ministry of State Security (MSS). Known colloquially as the *Bo-wi-bu* (보위부), this agency will initially hold suspects in a short-term detention center called a *ku-ryu-jang* (구류장), where they are interrogated before trial. Anyone convicted can expect a jail sentence in a *kyo-hwa-so* (교화소) re-education through labor camp, while the most serious offenders might be sent to a *kwan-li-so* (관리소) political prison camp and never seen again.

*"It depends on who arrested me at first. If I were caught by police patrols, they immediately took me to a mobile labor brigade. If I were caught by security agents, they would take me to a waiting room for investigation in a local police office and put me in jail. Then I would be subjected to an interrogation process. If they thought I was responsible for distributing a significant amount of [illicit] video material or watched pornography, I would be handed over to preliminary trial, then to trial, and then be sent to a re-education through labor camp."*

(Escapee 1)

*"If people were caught through an inspection by a task force of the Party's Censorship of Anti-Socialism Bureau No. 27 (중앙당 27 국 검열 비사회주의 그루빠), they sent people to prison as an example to others. People are sent to a reeducation through labor camp after undergoing an investigation, preliminary trial, and trial by the local police office (분주소 보안서)." (Escapee 2)*

*"When people were caught by the Bo-wi-bu, they were detained at a short-term detention center at Bo-wi-bu headquarters. If the security agents figured out it was not a counterrevolutionary video, the culprits would be sent to the police office." (Escapee 10)*

For students, they often do not face a criminal prosecution but are instead reported to their Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League (김일성-김정일주의청년동맹) chapter for investigation. Very often they will be forced to write a self-criticism paper.<sup>2</sup>

This section will examine the different influences these factors can have on whether or not a North Korean is caught and the punishment they ultimately receive.

### Bribery

Despite the penalties spelled out in the Criminal Code, in today's North Korea, it is increasingly possible for citizens to bribe their way out of trouble.

Escapees say that local officials are most likely to accept bribes, especially when the alleged crimes involve relatively common illicit content such as Chinese television dramas. Things get more difficult should the provincial and national-level security forces become involved and if the content seized is anti-regime, pornographic, or there are large quantities of it.

Driving this willingness of officials to accept bribes is the changing North Korean economy and social system. As the State economy has weakened, vital services, such as the public distribution system for food, have been cut and that has affected everyone, including security officials.<sup>3</sup>

Hand-in-hand with the collapse of the State economy, the private economy has grown and given some citizens more private wealth.

2 Interview with Escapee 24 in Seoul, South Korea.

3 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *The Price is Rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, United Nations Human Rights Office, 2019, 4. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights_EN.pdf) (hereinafter OHCHR, *The Price is Rights*).

"North Korean society has turned into a bribery society. High-ranking officials love going to inspections because they can get bribes."  
(Escapee 37)

Despite the growing willingness of officials to accept bribes, it is not guaranteed that a payment will offer a way out of trouble. Even if it does, the typical amount required will put financial stress on an individual or family, so a bribe still represents a challenge for many North Koreans. Several escapees talked of pooling money from family and friends.

"It depends on who you are but the average worker earns 3,000 to 4,000 North Korean Won per month, which is about 40 to 50 U.S. cents. If you're paying a bribe it should be at least \$2 to \$3, but probably between \$10 and \$50."<sup>4</sup>  
(Escapee 26)

Other escapees talked of considerably higher bribes after authorities discovered the accused had family members overseas.

"After I got to South Korea, I made some money and sent it to my mother in North Korea, but then the authorities found out about this so my mother had to pay 12,000 Renminbi (\$1,750) as a way out [of trouble]."  
(Escapee 34)

Friends and family of the accused are motivated to contribute because they have often watched the same content and their names could come up during interrogation.

"One time, my friend got caught while watching dramas so his group of seven friends gathered in his house and we tried to find a way out. We didn't know if our friend would tell our names to the authorities and we'd all be in huge trouble. In North Korea, they don't just interrogate, they hit and kick you, so we collected money and went to find a judge to get him out. Once you get caught and the interrogation begins, it's nearly impossible to stay quiet so the longer he was in there, the more likely he was to speak up. You have to bail people out as fast as you can."  
(Escapee 28)

The large amounts of money involved appear unrealistic when compared to a State wage, but they reflect the significant sums being made by some outside of the formal State-run economy. After all, the amount required to bribe an official is also dictated by market forces.

However, not all North Koreans are making money in the markets or through their own business ventures, so this has created a two-tier justice system, where the rich are able to get away with things that the poor cannot.

"If you're not rich then it's really hard for you to even dare to watch this kind of video."  
(Escapee 28)

"If you get caught watching South Korean movies, you're supposed to go to prison. For those people of less-fortunate financial backgrounds they wouldn't readily watch South Korean movies, but for people who are rich enough to pay a bribe then they would consume South Korean media."

(Escapee 34)

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) concluded that this delivers a double blow to North Korean citizens.

"The threat of arrest, detention and prosecution provide State officials with a powerful means of extorting money from a population struggling to survive. The cycle of violations is thereby complete: as people strive to realize an adequate standard of living outside of a failed public distribution system, they are subject to the threat of prosecution and further human rights violations."<sup>5</sup>

## Distance from Pyongyang

The willingness of officials to accept bribes also appears to be related to how far a city is from Pyongyang. This is partly because remote areas of North Korea are the ones that first feel the pinch from the collapsing State economy and also because ideology is weaker in the provinces. This is especially true in areas along the Chinese border.

Problems in these distant cities, once they get reported, can bring unwelcome oversight from the MSS headquarters in Pyongyang and cost local officials their jobs, so local security officers have a personal interest in maintaining the veneer of a well-managed city.

"When you go to border towns or towns far away from Pyongyang, you'll see they have a lot of problems. But lower-level officials don't really report them because once that happens then they're the ones who will get fired because they're the ones that were in charge. In North Korea the one thing people fear the most is getting executed or getting fired so lower-level officials at the local level don't want upper-level officials to know about all of the problems. These lower-level officials try to keep information about problems silent."  
(Jung Gwang-il, Founder and President, No Chain for North Korea)

Several escapees spoke of local police officials providing advance warning of city crackdowns by provincial security forces so that the inspection would go well and no serious problems were found.

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4 This reflects the typical wage at a State-run company; however, some North Koreans have their wages substantially increased by bonuses or earn more money working in the private economy.

5 OHCHR, *The Price is Rights*, 25.

## Martyn Williams

"When police or intelligence officers got word of an inspection, they let people know to hide their potentially problematic electronic devices and video material. They didn't want problems in their area, so they just turned a blind eye." (Escapee 10)

"It became normal to watch South Korean dramas and even the police officers and intelligence officers did. They let people know and asked them not to watch them for a while before Group 109 inspections began. They tried their best to prevent incidents in their police districts." (Escapee 21)

## The Power of Connections

Not all North Koreans have to worry a lot about unannounced raids. Those with good *songbun* in the upper class of society are less likely to get caught because of their social status.

The *songbun* system classifies all North Koreans by their political, social, and economic background and will either help or hinder their entire lives. Those with good *songbun* can expect to get into good universities, get good jobs and live in the best cities while those with bad *songbun* might expect a life in a village.<sup>6</sup>

If you have good *songbun*, you probably have good connections with Party and security service officials.

"I didn't have to worry about getting caught because the person who enforces crackdowns was personally connected to me. He was a city-level official so I didn't have to worry about city inspectors. When it came to provincial-level inspectors, I used to get a phone call a few days before a crackdown so I was able to hide anything that needed to be hidden." (Escapee 29)

There are also traders and others that maintain a good connection with local officials and can get word of an impending raid.

"My brother-in-law knew the police and internal security officers well, so he wasn't caught."  
(Escapee 4)

Some of the best positioned to make use of advance warnings are law enforcement officers themselves, who are just as eager to view foreign content as regular citizens, according to several escapees. However, they risk a little bit more in doing so because the penalty can be higher if they or family members are caught.

"Law enforcement and security officers whose children were watching such CDs were terrified that their children would also run into trouble whenever faced with a Party inspection (중앙 당검열). In Hoeryong, many people were punished, but people who were caught by Party censorship inspections were sent to mobile labor brigades to make an example out of them." (Escapee 4)

"There was an incident when senior officials watched such material secretly, but their children mentioned it outside the home, so it became a problem."

(Escapee 12)

## Types of Content

The nature of foreign media plays a big part in how offenders will be treated when caught. While the law makes no differentiation between the subject matter of content, in practice, the attitude of the authorities and the punishment delivered are based on the perceived threat that the content poses to the regime.

When it comes to commercial content, the lowest-risk material includes movies from countries such as China, India, and Russia. These pose a low threat as their story lines are rarely political and the countries are not judged to be hostile to North Korea.

A step higher are movies and soap operas from the United States and South Korea. As both are judged to be enemy states, the penalties can be higher.

"I watched Chinese movies through video CD players but for South Korean movies we used USB drives and SD cards because they're easier to hide. Because of the electricity problems in North Korea, we would charge a laptop and then lock all the doors, pull the curtains across and watch South Korean movies." (Escapee 35)

But because of the large amount of such content in the country, a bribe will often work to escape trouble, especially with local law enforcement.

The riskiest content includes anything that is anti-regime, religious, explores or attacks the Kim family, and all pornography.

"You'll get in trouble but it depends what the content is. If it's just Chinese content or an entertainment show it's less, but if it's something to do with the ideology you might get executed or disappear." (Escapee 27)

Occasionally, complicating things are shifting political winds or the domestic security environment. What might have been relatively tolerated can suddenly become the target of a crackdown during a so-called *teuk-byeo-gyeong-bi-ju-gan* (특별경비주간) special inspection

6 Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System* (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012). [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Songbun\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf).

week. One such crackdown reportedly happened in the run up to the summit between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in in October 2018.<sup>7</sup>

*"There are times when there are severe inspections because Kim Jong-un has ordered them to do so and if you get caught while watching minuscule content you might get severely punished."*  
(Escapee 26)

*"House searches were conducted without any notice or warning during the special guard week."*

(Escapee 20)

Another crackdown reportedly occurred before the 2019 Supreme People's Assembly elections when authorities in North Pyongan province launched a crackdown on foreign content, including South Korean dramas and Chinese movies. One report said new rules judged Chinese movies based on whether they were subtitled or not. If the cast is speaking Chinese with Korean subtitles, the movie would be confiscated, but if it had been dubbed into Korean then it would not.<sup>8, 9</sup>

North Korean escapees interviewed indicated that they would usually calculate the risk of different types of content and make their viewing decisions based on what they thought they could get away with.

## Pornography

The North Korean regime has a particularly severe attitude when it comes to pornography. As outlined above, it was specifically called out in Article 193 of the Criminal Code until the 2012 revision when it was merged with other content.

Penalties for watching it are universally more severe than most other types of content.

*"The biggest problem was when people got caught watching pornography rather than South Korean soap operas or movies. They would be sentenced to four years imprisonment, but some were granted amnesty one year or one year and a half later."*  
(Escapee 1)

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7 Kim Yoo-jin, "Soldiers' discharge dates postponed for inter-Korean summit," *Daily NK*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/soldiers-discharge-dates-postponed-for-inter-korean-summit/>.

8 Kim Yoo-jin, "Authorities ramp up house raids as US-DPRK talks approach," *Daily NK*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/authorities-ramp-up-house-raids-as-us-dprk-talks-approach/>.

9 Kim Yoo-jin, "North Korean government task force employs new censorship tactics," *Daily NK*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-government-task-force-employs-new-censorship-tactics/>.

Few are willing to talk about its distribution and the demand for it inside the country, which itself is an indication of the extreme sensitivity of the subject—although one person with knowledge of cross-border trade said pornography is the most valuable content in North Korea today. Even middle school students and high school students at the border in the major cities are watching it.

According to the account, SD memory cards filled with pornographic movies fetch incredibly high prices. A blank 8-gigabyte memory card might cost around \$5, and that jumps to \$10 if it has content such as dramas and movies on it. If the dramas and movies are new, then the price doubles again to \$20 or sometimes more. A card with pornographic content will start selling at around \$100 and can reach \$500 if it has what's judged to be the best content.

That price reflects both the demand for pornography and also the risks that dealers and traders face in handling it.

One escapee said that he would often ask friends if they had any good foreign dramas or movies, even broaching the subject with some who were not close friends, but who he felt he knew well enough. Despite the potential risks, the climate was becoming relaxed enough around foreign content that he felt he could. But he never did the same with pornography.

*"Watching pornography is strongly restricted. I've heard you can get executed for watching pornography."*  
(Escapee 29)

Pornography is a particular problem for authorities in northern border areas, where content flows more freely across the China-North Korea border. In 2015, Amnesty International interviewed a North Korean escapee who claimed to have witnessed a public execution in Hyesan, Yanggang province, of a man who was caught watching pornography with his wife and another woman.<sup>10</sup>

As is typical in North Korea, the entire city was summoned to watch the execution so that it served as a powerful warning. It took place at Hyesan Airport, where the man was executed. The women were sent to prison.

Also in Hyesan in January 2019, six high school boys and girls were reportedly caught engaging in sexual acts while watching pornography. Following the arrests, the Hyesan authorities gathered around 2,000 of the city's high school and university students, members of the Women's League, Labor Union, and Party officials to an event that paraded those caught with pornography or engaging in banned sexual acts on stage and denounced them.<sup>11,12</sup>

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10 Connection Denied: Restrictions on Mobile Phones and Outside Information in North Korea, ASA 24/3373/2016 (London, UK: Amnesty International, 2016), 44. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa24/3373/2016/en/>.

11 Kang Ji-won, "Six high-school students caught engaging in lewd acts," *Asiapress*, February 22, 2019.

12 Kang Ji-won, "Porn and punishment," *Asiapress*, February 27, 2019.

# Public Trials and Executions

Of all the tools available to the North Korean regime to keep its population under control, the most effective is one of the easiest to understand: execution.

*"North Korea regularly executes someone as an example. Money and fear are the most important things in North Korean society."* (Escapee 26)

Executions are a tool that is used again and again in the country, and has been cataloged and detailed by numerous escapees. Often, the executions take place in a public space, such as a stadium or town square, with forced attendance of the family of the condemned. The local population is often forced to attend.

*"Ever since mid-2018, we have seen an increase in urban trials in almost every part of North Korea. I think the main purpose of having open trials for watching Korean dramas is to put fear into people that if you watch these dramas, you will get punished openly. For this year's [2019] Lunar New Year, there was an open trial in Pyongyang. They sentenced the distributor to death on the charge of watching Korean dramas and instilling negative ideas in people."* (Escapee 25)

With the condemned tied to a wooden post, three MPS officials will each fire three rounds to kill the prisoner. It is a particularly gruesome reminder to the local people of what might happen if they break the rules.

*"To prevent people in my hometown from going to China, they brought this person who had lived in China for 10 years to the front of the railway station so everyone can see them. And then they executed him in front of everyone. I was only 12-years-old and I was scared and frightened."* (Escapee 34)

Nevertheless, desperation drives people to do things they normally would not do, and this escapee said that about five years after witnessing the execution, she risked her own life to escape to China.

*"It was scary, but I did it because it was really hard to live over there and there wasn't much to eat. It was because of the harsh living circumstances. I really didn't want to go back either. Those who aren't really well off continue to live in poor circumstances and I wanted to go to China and make some money. As I was underage at the time, I figured that even if I got caught I wouldn't go to a prison camp."* (Escapee 34)

The public setting of executions led the United Nations (UN) COI to estimate in 2014 that "[a]lmost every citizen of the DPRK has become a witness to an execution."<sup>13</sup>

When it comes to crimes concerning foreign content, the application of the death penalty appears to be waning. Under Kim Jong-il in the late nineties and early 2000s, the death penalty was often used to punish those convicted of consumption of South Korean media, but the last incident cataloged by the Transitional Justice Working Group was in 2013/2014.<sup>14</sup> However, the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS) said in a 2017 published report that the Kim regime "has increasingly turned to ruthless public executions to quell rising public discontent over the regime's excessive mobilization of residents to perform forced labor and make more donations in preparation for state projects."<sup>15</sup>

*"Between 2001 and 2003, if you got caught while listening to shortwave radio, you got executed, but nowadays, if you give a big enough bribe, then you're good to go. It's a very important change to the environment in how they treat it."*

(Escapee 26)

This appears to be the result of mass consumption of foreign content. It is not feasible to execute every citizen who is found in possession of a USB stick or DVD so, instead, they get sent to labor camps.

*"It's nearly impossible to execute everyone who's watched foreign content or even imprison them because if so, the authorities have to build a hundred prisons and they'd still be packed."*

(Escapee 29)

Still, the death penalty and public executions remain a tool in the regime's arsenal, particularly for serious material such as anti-regime content, pornography, or large-scale dealers of content.

*"Sometimes they kill people. If something is quite popular, they need to pressure people so they catch a couple of cases and kill them. That's another way they put pressure on the society to intimidate people."*

(Escapee 41)

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13 Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the DPRK*, A/HRC/25/CRP.1 (Geneva: UN Human Rights Council, 2014), 262. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx>.

14 Sarah Son, et al., *Mapping the Fate of the Dead: Killings and Burials in North Korea* (Seoul, South Korea: Transitional Justice Working Group, 2019), 34. <https://en.tjwg.org/mapping-project-north-korea/>.

15 White Paper on the Misgovernance of the Kim Jong-un Regime over the Past Five Years, 18 (Seoul, Korea: Institute for National Security Strategy, 2017). <http://www.inss.re.kr/inss/attach/getFile.do?fileId=7602>.

## SECTION 4: CATCHING OFFENDERS

Through a combination of border security, random street inspections, and targeted inspections of houses or housing blocks, the authorities attempt to regulate the consumption of foreign media by leaving citizens in a constant state of fear of being caught.

### Border Security

North Korea's first line of defense against the influx of uncensored information is its 1,420-kilometer (880 mile) border with China. Almost all of the foreign media that physically circulates in North Korea is brought across the Yalu and Tumen Rivers that separate the two countries. In some places, the river is only a few meters wide and along most of its length, the border meanders through sparsely populated areas of both China and North Korea that are ideal for smuggling.

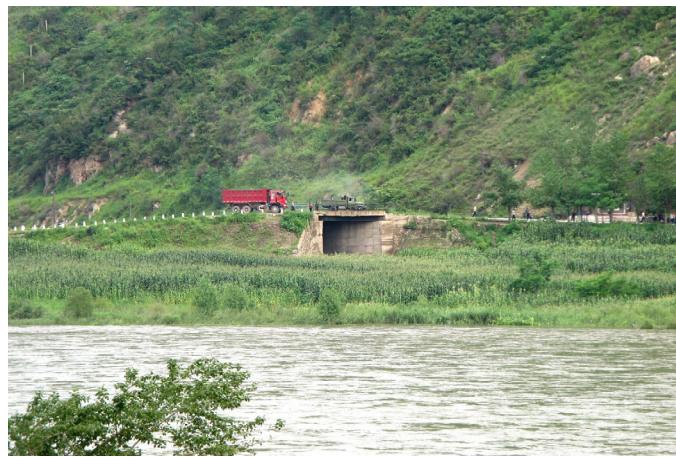


Figure 1: North Korean trucks and workers seen across the Yalu River from Jian, China, in 2012. (Photo: Caitriona Nicholson/Flickr, CC-BY-SA-2.0)

To combat this illicit trade, North Korea began building up its border security after Kim Jong-un came into power. The first thing to appear was new fencing, which now covers most of the border.

Much of the smuggling that happens across the border is done with the consent of the border guards, who receive bribes from traders. Like everywhere else in today's North Korea, corruption is rife.

Accounts vary on how much money is required to ensure safe passage of people or goods across the border and it appears that the North Korean State is constantly trying to stop border guards from taking bribes, battling with the lucrative sums on offer.

To try and counter the bribery, changes began around 2014. Guards are moved between regions more frequently now so they do not have more than a few months to build up relationships with local smugglers. Then, the situation along the border got stricter in general.

*"In October 2014, they replaced the guards every three months and tried to prevent them from having any contact with local residents. And there was an order that people who got close to the border were to be considered traitors and should be killed. So, in the Musan area, people have to pay up a lot when they try to escape North Korea. They need to bribe officers such as company commanders to defect, but now the cost is 20,000,000 Korean Won [about \$17,000]."*

(Escapee 11)

Bribes for goods are cheaper and they continue to cross the border.

*"When I was in China in 2010, I heard from a smuggler that it takes roughly a week or so for a Korean drama to get spread in North Korea by DVD. But nowadays, I've heard it takes roughly three days."*

(Escapee 25)

Border trading and smuggling is occasionally disrupted by security service crackdowns that can be linked to special events or security incidents in the country. Rarely do they appear to target a specific piece of foreign content, but that reportedly happened in early 2015 after the release of the satirical U.S. movie, "The Interview," which portrayed Kim Jong-un in a comical light and ended with his on-screen death.

Recently, more technology has been added to the regime's battle. There is now a video-surveillance camera network that is said to cover the entire border with China.<sup>16, 17, 18</sup>

The cameras have a traditional deterrent role against smugglers and escapees, and help border guards keep watch, but they also have a second purpose: they allow superiors to keep watch on the border guards themselves, either to stop them from taking bribes or to ensure that they receive a cut of the money from lower-rank officers.

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16 Kang Ji-won, "Things Still Tense in Border River Area After Purge of Jang Song-taeck," *Asiapress*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.asiapress.org/rimjinn-gang/2014/07/news/border-purge/>.

17 Jo Hyon, "Video surveillance network expanded on China-North Korea border," *Daily NK*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/video-surveillance-network-expanded-on-china-north-korea-border/>.

18 Mun Dong-hui, "Surveillance cameras installed to cover entire Sino-North Korean border region," *Daily NK*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/surveillance-cameras-installed-to-cover-entire-sino-north-korean-border-region/>.

## Street Inspections

North Koreans have to endure on-the-spot street inspections where security officials search for anything suspicious, including illicit content. This can include both physical searches and checks on the content of their smartphones.

"In Pyongyang, there are police officers who regularly search people and do body inspection to see if they have foreign content. They check that on smartphones too."

(Escapee 27)

"They inspect mobile phones and search for videos and look at your chat log with friends. They're looking to see if they have South Korean words or colloquialisms in text messages because you will not naturally get those unless you watch South Korean TV shows and dramas."

(Escapee 25)

Escapees said that the most common time to be stopped and questioned is at night, when fewer people are walking the streets. Security officials check the identification papers of people and, if there is any doubt about their story, will escort them to a guard post to conduct a body search.

"When they conduct a body search, they make people strip down, and even ask them to take off their underwear. If one resists and gets defiant, they will beat you up without mercy."

(Escapee 1)

"In Chongjin, night patrols usually targeted males. But if they were suspicious of women, they brought in the female patrols. They would conduct body searches after having the suspects strip down to their underwear."

(Escapee 7)

The transition away from bulky VHS tapes and DVDs is making it easier for citizens to evade trouble during such checks. USB sticks are significantly smaller and can be hidden more easily but are still at risk of being found. MicroSD cards are much more difficult to discover because they are so small and, if they are about to be found, can be easily destroyed by snapping them in half. They can also be easily hidden in someone's mouth ahead of an inspection.

"There has been an increase in inspections and rates. Before, there was one inspection agency called 109, but now there are more agencies focused on inspections. Now, there is a new inspection agency that is only focused on youths because these Korean dramas have such a profound effect on young people."

(Escapee 25)

Some escapees said street inspections will target people with particular clothes or hairstyles judged to be influenced by South Korea. One escapee said the tolerance for foreign clothing has increased as it has become more popular but people can still get in trouble if an

item is judged to be too short or tight, if skin can be seen, or if it is a pair of jeans or a jeans jacket.

## House Raids

Unannounced raids on the homes of citizens are an important tool in the North Korean regime's arsenal against foreign content. The raids do not require warrants and can happen at any time of the day or night, leaving occupants constantly on edge if they are watching foreign media or have any in the home.

"If there were any suspicions, they just showed up and conducted house searches. Completely closing the curtains would turn one into a target. People would seal their [video players] in a plastic bag and hide them in water jars."

(Escapee 9)

"I was afraid because there are always groups coming around doing inspections for foreign content so I would put curtains on my windows."

(Escapee 27)

Anyone caught is arrested on-the-spot and taken in for questioning. During interrogations, the authorities will typically try to elicit information about where the content came from, including the identification of others who have access to it.

But catching people at home is a constant game of cat and mouse.

In the days of VHS cassettes, CDs and DVDs, the authorities would cut electrical power to entire city blocks jamming the video cassette or DVD inside the player. Officers could then go door-to-door looking for offenders. The panic that created caused some to throw the entire player out of the window to avoid getting caught.<sup>19</sup>

"I witnessed a friend's house being inspected. She threw the bag containing CDs out of the window. It was not found, so my friend got away with it."

(Escapee 8)

Others said they would have two tape or DVD players: one registered with the authorities and one that was not. During such a raid they had to hide the unregistered player, with the illicit content stuck inside, and hope authorities would be satisfied when they entered an apartment and found the registered player with no illegal content.

These methods eventually became obsolete because of the ingenuity of electronics makers and the progress of technology.

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19 COI, Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the DPRK, 60.

*"If you get caught, you have to dispose of the evidence. In the late 2000s or early 2010s, smugglers in Dandong created a DVD player which you can manually take a DVD out of, but because of the introduction of USB drives those players are now obsolete. Micro USB drives are better because they're small and easy to hide."* (Escapee 26)

In areas where electricity is scarce, which is most of North Korea outside of Pyongyang, authorities play a different game.

*"They provide electricity to the targeted apartments so that the people in those apartments can use their TVs and players to watch whatever they have in the home. After a certain time, the police officers will raid the entire housing unit and search everywhere to look for USB drives, smartphones, or whatever."*

(Escapee 29)

But even this method is becoming less useful. The poor state of North Korea's electrical grid has spurred many homes to invest in solar panels and storage batteries, so they rely less on State-provided electricity.

*"These days, almost all households have batteries and almost every electrical appliance in North Korea works with a 12-volt battery, so if the authorities shut down the electricity, then people connect the battery to the DVD player so they can bring the disc out. That only happens in the apartments where ordinary people and those of the middle class live. Apartments where the upper class live don't get raided."* (Escapee 29)

## The *Inminban*

No discussion of North Korea's legal and physical enforcement would be complete without recognition of the *inminban*. In North Korea's top-down structure of citizen control, the *inminban* sits at the lowest level, but plays one of the most important roles in the Party's control and surveillance structure.

The *inminban* system ensures that many of the basic privacies that people around the world take for granted do not exist in North Korea. The name is often translated into English as "neighborhood watch unit," but it is not neighbors looking out for neighbors. It is neighbors spying on neighbors on behalf of the regime.

In a typical North Korean city, a single *inminban* covers 20-40 households (this number can be slightly larger or smaller depending on geography) and every person in every household has to be a member. The only exception to this rule is Kim Jong-un himself.<sup>20</sup>

The *inminban* leader is usually a middle-aged woman of a "good" family background who is charged with keeping constant watch over the households in her unit. As such, she knows all the inhabitants of her unit and will keep watch for anything that might be deemed "unusual."

This can include visitors to houses, unreported overnight stays, someone not going to work, curtains remaining closed during the daytime, and adultery. She will also try to elicit information from members about their neighbors.<sup>21</sup>

*"Sometimes there can be a spy in the inminban so you can't trust anyone."*

(Escapee 39)

One of her duties is to try and detect if neighbors are watching foreign videos or listening to foreign radio broadcasts. This means neighbors have to keep the volume low so no sound can travel outside of the house. They also need to be careful if watching late at night after State television has signed off the air as the light from a television set could indicate illicit content is being watched.

*"I was always scared about being caught. Sometimes inspections randomly happened, such as if there was a runaway convict near my neighborhood. Police officers would come into the houses and see if those families were hiding the convict. If they found any USB drives, they'd collect them and see if they have movies or dramas. If you're watching these videos, then you had to lock the doors. There were two locks on the gates of my house."* (Escapee 28)

*Inminban* leaders have the authority to visit homes anytime, day or night, and they maintain contact with the local police, the MPS, and the MSS.

*"I was watching movies at a friend's house and the leader of the inminban reported us. They conducted a house raid. I was caught in the act by an anti-socialist monitoring squad and arrested. I was detained in a waiting room in the local police office, then sent to the Hoeryong Mobile Labor Brigade (회령노동단련대) for six months."* (Escapee 6)

The *inminban* also mobilizes its residents to carry out tasks, such as cleaning the streets or common areas, and holds weekly lecture sessions at which members study Party ideology. If residents want to travel to another area of the country, the first approval of several required is from the *inminban* leader.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Robert Collins, *Denied from the Start, Human Rights at the Local Level in North Korea*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North

Korea, 2018), 10. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins\\_Denied\\_FINALFINALFINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_Denied_FINALFINALFINAL_WEB.pdf).

21 Ken Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012), 43. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Ken-Gause\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Ken-Gause_Web.pdf).

22 OHCHR, *The Price is Rights*, 32.

## Martyn Williams

However, curiosity about foreign content has even reached the *inminban*. Several escapees talked of watching content together with the *inminban* leader, which gave them a bit of security from getting reported.

*"We connected a battery and watched South Korean dramas together. Even the leader of the *inminban* watched it as well, so it wasn't reported. The people who had already seen the drama stood guard outside."*

(Escapee 16)

# SECTION 5: NORTH KOREA'S SECURITY ORGANIZATIONS

North Korea has an expansive internal security apparatus that touches every part of the country. There are numerous bureaus and agencies watching the public, watching officials, watching the military, and also watching each other.

In all, it is estimated that there is a security agent for every 100 to 200 people, and those agents recruit informants from within the group who monitor to provide additional information.<sup>23</sup>

The monitoring of foreign content, its distribution and consumption, is usually left to the MSS and the MPS, which both sit directly under the State Affairs Council, which is chaired by Kim Jong-un. The agencies are not subject to oversight by the cabinet.<sup>24</sup>

## Ministry of State Security

The Ministry of State Security (국가안전보위부) is tasked with counter-intelligence and internal security functions including rooting out those suspected of political crimes, anti-State activities, economic crimes and disloyalty to the regime.<sup>25</sup> It is something akin to the “secret police” and in addition to its investigatory role it also controls a network of political prison camps.

The MSS is often referred to as the “Bo-wi-bu” (보위부), which is a shortened form of its Korean name. The MSS is one of the most feared institutions in North Korea.

Its base of operations is in Pyongyang, but it has provincial, city, and local-level offices throughout the country and monitors citizens of all levels. Because one of its jobs is to prevent disloyalty to the leadership, it pays special attention to citizens who have returned from overseas, including elite members of society.<sup>26</sup>

As distribution and consumption of foreign content is considered a crime against the State, the MSS is the agency most often handling the issue. It has several specialist groups that play a leading role in the country's battle against foreign content.

## Ministry of People's Security

The Ministry of People's Security (인민보안부) is counterpart to the MSS for covering basic policing. It has over 200,000 personnel in its ranks and handles common law and order and operates the prison system.

Its duties include monitoring internal traffic and travel, protecting some State officials and buildings, investigating common criminal cases, monitoring the public distribution system and handling the census.<sup>27</sup>

## Bureau 15

Bureau 15 is a unit of the MSS that handles mobile communications. Its work includes monitoring North Korea's internal cellular networks and attempting to prevent the use of foreign cell phones for cross-border phone calls.

The bureau is subordinate to the MSS central headquarters and sits at the same level as each provincial MSS office. It was previously called Bureau 12, but changed its name in 2018.<sup>28</sup>

## Bureau 27

Bureau 27 is involved with digital and radio wave detection, and plays a key role in controlling North Korea's Internet traffic and phone calls. It is sometimes called the Transmission Surveillance Bureau.<sup>29</sup>

One of its jobs is to both block and locate Chinese cell phones being used inside North Korea on the Chinese cellular networks. Signals from the Chinese network reach several kilometers inside North Korea and offer the chance of phone calls to anywhere in the world as well as a high-speed Internet connection.

<sup>23</sup> Ken Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State* (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012), 54. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Ken-Gause\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Ken-Gause_Web.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> ROK Ministry of Unification, “Organizational Chart of North Korean Leadership,” January 2018, [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/infoNK/leadership/party/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/infoNK/leadership/party/).

<sup>25</sup> Ken Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Ken Gause, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un* (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North

Korea, 2015), 258. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Gause\\_NKHOC\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Gause_NKHOC_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Ken Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Mun Dong-hui, “North Korean authorities ramp up efforts to prevent cross-border information leakage,” *Daily NK*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-ramp-up-efforts-to-prevent-cross-border-information-leakage/>.

<sup>29</sup> COI, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the DPRK*, 55.

Bureau 27 has sophisticated technology from Germany's Rohde & Schwarz that can triangulate the location of people making illicit phone calls. This makes using Chinese phones in border areas particularly dangerous; so, most calls are kept to 2 minutes or less.

Its equipment can detect waves emitted by devices, such as computers, televisions, and cell phones, and helps to identify homes targeted for inspections and to hunt for illicit hardware within those homes.<sup>30</sup> The same equipment is also used to target people who may be hiding a cell phone on their body.<sup>31</sup>

## Group 109

Group 109 (109그루卑) is a specialist task force run by the MSS that works with local police agencies to stop the distribution and consumption of illicit foreign content.<sup>32</sup> It was established on October 9, 2003 on the direct orders of Kim Jong-il and gets its name from its founding date.<sup>33</sup> Of all the specialist groups that target foreign content distribution and consumption, it is by far the most commonly mentioned by escapees.

It was largely concerned with books and magazines when it was founded, but today it spends much of its time investigating the distribution and consumption of foreign content on USB drives and MicroSD cards.

Group 109 has units in major cities of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and officers with the group are allowed to conduct searches of homes without warrants. Its operating methods include nighttime raids, when occupants are asleep.<sup>34</sup>

Those found in possession of such content face immediate arrest.

## Group 114

Group 114 is tasked with restricting access to "impure media," primarily foreign content, and was created by the MSS and the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD). It works alongside Groups 109 and 118 and investigates people who have obtained foreign media. It also tries to prevent it from entering North Korea.<sup>35</sup>

It was reportedly created in 2012 after Kim Jong-un ordered a crackdown on foreign content entering the country. Like Group 118, it is much less frequently mentioned by escapees than Group 109.

A U.S. State Department report said it also surveils escapees living in China and is involved in kidnapping them to return them to North Korea. "If captured, these individuals are either executed or sent into the political prison camp system, where serious human rights abuses such as torture, deliberate starvation, forced labor, and sexual violence are systematized as a matter of State policy," the report said.<sup>36</sup>

## Group 118

Little information is available about Group 118 (118 그루卑), but it is understood to have originally been formed as a force against the use of illegal drugs. From 2011, the group has become involved in home and workplace searches, including computers, digital media, and smartphones. The group is also suspected of being involved in the detection of Chinese cell phones.<sup>37, 38, 39</sup>

It is made up of officers from both the MSS and the MPS.

30 "Sea of Blood at Kim Il Sung Politics University," Daily NK, November 29, 2013, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sea-of-blood-at-kim-il-sung-polit/>.

31 Connection Denied, ASA 24/3373/2016, 34.

32 Ken Gause, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un*, 221.

33 COI, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the DPRK*, 60.

34 U.S. Department of State, *Report on Serious Human Rights Abuses or Censorship in North Korea*, December 10, 2018, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/121018-report-on-serious-human-rights-abuses-or-censorship-in-north-korea/>.

35 "Residents Pull Plug on SK TV Dramas For Now," Daily NK, October 20, 2014, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/residents-pull-plug-on-sk-tv-drama/>.

36 U.S. Department of State, *Report on Serious Human Rights Abuses or Censorship in North Korea*.

37 Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee, and Seamus Tuohy, *Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: InterMedia, 2017), 27.

38 U.S. Department of State, *Report on Serious Human Rights Abuses or Censorship in North Korea*, December 10, 2018, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/121018-report-on-serious-human-rights-abuses-or-censorship-in-north-korea/>.

39 NoCutNews, "北, 주민 감시 조직 강화...'118상무' 또 신설," NoCutNews, March 3, 2011, <https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/808643>.

# SECTION 6: IDEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE INFUX OF FOREIGN MEDIA

The second arm of North Korea's defense against foreign content is ideological. North Koreans are exposed to ideological education from before they can talk and it touches every daily element of their lives until they die.

Citizens are fed a centrally-controlled diet of propaganda that never ceases. A vast control and censorship apparatus ensures that North Korean citizens get the same message whether they pick up a newspaper or magazine, switch on a radio, watch television, go to a play or concert, or attend a workplace meeting.

There is no alternative point of view. There is only the Party and the leader.

It is no surprise then that the country is continually ranked as one of the worst in the world for media freedom by Reporters Without Borders.<sup>40</sup>

But North Korean television and radio stations and newspapers are not media organizations in the traditional sense. The whole reason they were established and continue to exist is to spread Party propaganda.

Kim Il-sung was setting up magazines back in the 1920s when he was fighting the Japanese. "Saenal" (새날) was established on January 15, 1928 with a weekly print run of a few hundred copies, produced by a 16-year-old Kim himself—at least if you believe North Korean propaganda.<sup>41, 42, 43</sup>

Almost 20 years later in 1945, one of the first acts of Kim Il-sung upon the founding of the Korean Communist Party was to form a newspaper. This is what he said in a speech to Korean Communist Party members on October 17, 1945:

"Now that the party has been founded, we should begin publishing a party organ, an official party newspaper, as soon as possible. The official party newspaper performs a role of exceedingly important significance in properly educating party members and the popular masses and organizing and mobilizing them into a revolutionary struggle. The official party newspaper is a mighty propagandist disseminating the line and policy of the party widely and in a timely manner and a reliable organizer positively defending the line and policy of the party and inspiring the masses to their implementation."

That role is still central to North Korean media today. This is how the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) describes itself:

"The KCNA is the only official mouthpiece for the Workers' Party of Korea and the DPRK government which came into being and has developed under the care of the peerlessly great persons of Mt. Paektu and, it is a powerful media organ standing on the forefront of the party ideological work for realizing the cause of modeling the whole society on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism."<sup>44</sup>

The State media has, at its heart, the mission of glorifying the leader and the Party.

As more foreign information has flowed into North Korea, the State has worked harder at promoting its own message while countering ideas coming in from overseas. It has also had to take a more direct approach by addressing the problem of foreign media at the workplace and *inminban* meetings, and denouncing those found in possession of foreign content.

Coordinating all of this is the PAD.

## Total Control: The Propaganda and Agitation Department

"It is advisable that the newspapers carry articles in which they unfailingly hold the President in high esteem, adore him and praise him as the great revolutionary leader."

—"Kim Jong-il, The Great Teacher of Journalists," Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1983.

The Propaganda and Agitation Department (선전선동부), known officially as the Workers' Party of Korea Publicity and Information Department, sits on top of all North Korean media outlets. While a number of broadcasting stations, newspapers, and publishing houses exist and give the appearance of diversity, all media is State owned and

<sup>40</sup> World Press Freedom Index (Paris, France: Reporters Without Borders, April 2019). <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

<sup>41</sup> Yi Kwang-chae, *Overview of North Korean Publications*, Seoul, Korea: Pukhanui Ollon, December 30, 1990.

<sup>42</sup> "Pen is mighty ideological instrument of WPK," KCNA, November 1, 2001, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452002990-527174541/pen-is-mighty-ideological-instrument-of-wpk/>.

<sup>43</sup> "Korea's First Revolutionary Publication Saenal," KCNA, January 17, 2018, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1516185069-298718531/koreas-first-revolutionary-publication-saenal/>.

<sup>44</sup> "KCNA Founding Anniversary Marked," KCNA, December 4, 2016, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1546374277-324396470/kcna-founding-anniversary-marked/>.

## Martyn Williams

control of all content is subjugated to the PAD. It is one of the most powerful and important organizations in the country.<sup>45</sup>

The PAD's mission is to ensure that North Korean ideology is promoted through news reports, media, and artistic endeavors. As such, it works across the entirety of North Korea's media and arts sector to ensure that a common message is being delivered to the people, whether that be through a newspaper, television broadcast, movie, musical performance, or play. The PAD also dictates the lectures that every North Korean (with the exception of Kim Jong-un) must attend each week.

*"It's a very intricate and complex system which unites its people and reeducates them and instills loyalty for the Kim family. At the very top is the Korean Workers Party Central Committee and the Propaganda and Agitation Department. In every North Korean province and every city, in every organization and every military unit, in every company and every factory there is a Korean Workers' Party organization to create a very intricate spider web. Within those organizations there will be propaganda agents as well, so if Kim Jong-un says 'ah' then others all the way down to the lowest level will say "ah". There can only be 'ah' and nothing else, no 'er', no 'um.'"*

(Escapee 40)

To accomplish this, the PAD operates a pervasive control network that reaches far beyond the Central Committee and into establishments that are officially under the control of the North Korean Cabinet, such as the Ministry of Culture and the Central Broadcasting Committee (CBC).

By appointing, promoting, demoting, and dismissing thousands of workers in these sectors, it maintains effective control. To strengthen its grip even further, the PAD also places small teams of its own workers directly into publishing houses, movie studios, artistic troupes, and theater groups to oversee and approve the production of content at each phase of its creation. Work is continually referred to the PAD office and it is returned either approved or with comments on how it should be changed. Once this process is complete, it will get passed upwards for further approval by the main PAD office.

In the news and information sector, the CBC effectively oversees all radio and television broadcasting in the DPRK because PAD maintains control of it.

To carry out its job, it liaises closely with the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), also under the Central Committee, to ensure that media messaging matches whatever programs the OGD is pushing across the country. Every month, PAD distributes guidelines to all media outlets that spell out propaganda themes

that must be followed. The same themes are reflected in materials that work their way down to individuals.

*"The Workers' Party Propaganda and Agitation Department creates educational material and they distribute it all the way down to the inminban. There are regular meetings in every workplace and offices and in those meetings they bring up information about overseas content."* (Escapee 33)

This system ensures that the entirety of North Korean media moves in sync no matter the story or message to be delivered. While there may be minor differences in reporting across radio, television, and newspapers, the country's media outlets always deliver the same news with the same perspective. Based on media output alone, it is impossible for citizens to hear anything but the State point of view on any issue.

This also underlines why foreign media is so dangerous to the regime: it dares to offer a different view and presents facts that are not present in North Korean reporting.

The PAD has been under United States sanctions since 2016 for the role it plays in censorship in North Korea.<sup>46</sup>

The PAD is close to the Kim family in more than just mission. It was Kim Jong-il's first place of work after he graduated from Kim Il-sung University in 1964. One of the first books attributed to Kim Jong-il draws on his work in the department.<sup>47</sup>

"Let Us Create More Revolutionary Films Based on Socialist Life" includes a June 18, 1970, talk he gave to film makers. In it, he argues for more ideologically sound content to support the ruling Workers' Party. Here is one piece of advice Kim Jong-il dispensed on the role of a heroine in a movie, "The Woman Tractor Driver":

*"The heroine must explain and propagate our Party's policies to the farmers and young people and bring home to them its far-reaching plan for socialist rural construction. When she plays her role fully as a propagandist and educator, the farmers will trust her completely and love her warmly as a true daughter of the working class who has been sent to the rural areas, and will follow her example and unreservedly display their revolutionary zeal and creative activity in rural construction and agricultural production."*

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46 Press Center, "Announcement of Sanctions against North Korean Transportation, Mining, Energy, and Financial Services Industries and North Korean Government Officials and Organizations," U.S. Department of Treasury, March 16, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0385.aspx>.

47 North Korea Knowledge Dictionary, Seoul, Korea: ROK Ministry of Unification, 2019, <https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/term/viewNkKnwldgDicary.do?pageIndex=1&dicaryId=128>.

45 Michael Madden, "KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department," NK Leadership Watch, November 2009, <https://nkleadershipwatch.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/kwppropagandaandagitationdepartment.pdf>.

With Kim Jong-il working inside the PAD, it laid the groundwork that pushed Kim Il-sung from Prime Minister to President of the country and formulated the cult of the Kims that led to Kim Jong-il's eventual succession as leader. Today, the PAD remains just as vital in keeping Kim's power structure at the center of national affairs.

Pak Kwang-ho (박광호) has officially led the PAD since October 2017, when he was appointed to that position, a Member of the Political Bureau of the KWP, and a Vice Chairman of the Party Central Committee. He had previously served as Deputy Director of the PAD since 2012, before which nothing is known about his career.<sup>48, 49</sup>

It is believed that his role to the top came from ties to Kim Yo-jong (김여정), the sister of Kim Jong-un. She became First Vice Director of the PAD in 2015 and has effectively controlled the PAD and her brother's public image ever since then. In April 2019, Hyon Song-wol (현송월), former head of the Samjiyon Orchestra, became a member of the Party Central Committee and was named a Vice Director of the department and appears to be closely involved in shaping Kim Jong-un's image.<sup>50, 51, 52</sup>



Figure 2: Pak Kwang-ho (left), Kim Yo-jong (center), and Hyon Song-wol (right).

## The Third Broadcast Network

Radio is the oldest form of broadcasting in North Korea and is said to have begun on October 14, 1945, when Kim Il-sung's victory speech was broadcast live upon his arrival in Pyongyang. The Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS), on which the speech was made, remains the main national radio service and broadcasts news, music, speeches, and propaganda documentaries.<sup>53</sup>

Ten years later, the country launched Pyongyang Broadcasting Station (PBS), a propaganda-filled service principally aimed at South Korea, and some time after that the “third broadcast network” was born. Unlike the previous two, it does not broadcast over the airwaves.

The “Third broadcast network” (조선중앙제3방송) connects to almost every home in the country via a cable and is played through a simple speaker inside the house or apartment.

Because it cannot be monitored overseas, the “third broadcast network” is one of North Korea’s least understood ideological education systems and also the perfect channel for the North Korean authorities to broadcast sensitive news and information.

*“The third program is a very important part of North Korean propaganda. It has two motivations. The first is to educate people internally and the second is war preparations. On the first part, because it is a very internal broadcast, they can be very direct unlike KCTV. For example, KCTV might broadcast that a representative from America came to Pyongyang while on the third broadcast, they would say the representative is coming to this part of town so anyone in that part of town should clean the streets and wear nice clothes. They give instructions through the third broadcast.”* (Escapee 40)

Some of the programming on the “third broadcast network” directly addresses the issue of foreign content and even directly criticizes people caught in possession of it.

For most of the day, the “third broadcast network” speakers carry KCBS programming, but for several hours a day, a local program is broadcast. The timing of the local broadcasts is unclear, but one escapee who used to work on the broadcast said it went out from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Another escapee said that morning broadcasts began before 7:30 a.m.<sup>54, 55</sup>

48 “Second Plenum of Seventh WPK Central Committee,” KCNA, October 8, 2017, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/281270/second-plenum-of-seventh-wpk-central-committee/>.

49 “North Korean power directory,” Seoul, Korea: ROK Ministry of Unification, 2019, [https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/theme/viewPeople.do?menuld=PEOPLE\\_86&nkpmno=49817](https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/theme/viewPeople.do?menuld=PEOPLE_86&nkpmno=49817).

50 Michael Madden, “North Korea’s new propagandist?,” 38 North, August 14, 2015, <https://www.38north.org/2015/08/mmadden081415/>.

51 “Kim Yo Jong in de facto power of PAD,” Daily NK, July 20, 2015, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-yo-jong-in-de-facto-power-of-p/>.

52 “State media hints at growing role for Hyon Song Wol in party propaganda department,” NK News, June 4, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/06/state-media-hints-at-growing-role-for-hyon-song-wol-in-party-propaganda-department/>.

53 “Anniversary of Korean Central Broadcasting Station Marked,” KCNA, October 15, 2005, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452005240-388216339/anniversary-of-korean-central-broadcasting-station-marked/>.

54 Interview with Escapee 36.

55 Interview with Escapee 41.

## Martyn Williams

News and information on the “third broadcast network” are in line with whatever the PAD has instructed all media to cover.

“News procurement is pretty much the same as for KCTV and the Rodong newspaper. Every month instructions come from Pyongyang about what to cover, but sometimes, if we didn’t feel like going out to do the report, then we’d just copy and paste from the newspaper and change the headline.”  
(Escapee 36)

Tied to this are some truly local elements of news and information for the city. In recent years, some elements have even become capitalistic in style, with features on local restaurants. The “third broadcast network” is also used to denounce people who have committed crimes.

“Every Saturday, we had a 20-minute criticism session. This broadcast criticizes someone’s bad behavior. I was one of three journalists in the citizen’s education department working on writing this. I would go to the police station and get papers from the Party secretary of the station. After getting these details, I would write the articles.”  
(Escapee 36)

“The third broadcast sometimes features and criticizes someone. They even locate where they live. If this happens in Pyongyang, then it’s pretty certain that the person will get expelled from the city once you hear their name on the third broadcast.”  
(Escapee 37)

The broadcast calls out neighbors accused of all sorts of crimes and takes on societal issues influenced by the influx of foreign media.

“They would criticize anti-socialist hairstyles and fashion or things like being a merchant.”  
(Escapee 39)

The existence of the “third broadcast network” explains why the rest of major North Korean media does not directly take on such issues. State television, the major newspapers, and all other radio networks can be monitored overseas. Programming taking on societal ills, from foreign media to issues such as drugs and prostitution, would indicate North Korea has a problem with them.

“Because you can see it in the outside world. KCTV is only broadcasting the good parts of North Korea.”  
(Escapee 39)

However, there are signs that this system is slowly starting to crumble. Many escapees from provincial areas reported that the constant power cuts silenced the speakers and even when they did work, the volume was too low to hear the message.

“The broadcast barely came out, but if it did it was hard to hear due to the low volume. On it, police officers and intelligence

officers lectured not to watch South Korean dramas and be fooled by them, but people barely listened to them.”  
(Escapee 18)

“There was a third broadcast network speaker at home, but we barely listened to it, except when the Party asked people to write a report.”  
(Escapee 23)

When it comes to denouncing foreign media, other tools are available to the State, in addition to the “third broadcast network.”

## Daily and Weekly Meetings

Regular meetings are an important part of the system by which people are indoctrinated and kept in line. These occur at least weekly in every *inminban* across the country, but there are also daily meetings in workplaces.

The daily meetings are typically focused on whatever is being reported in the newspaper. Often, this is the *Rodong Sinmun*, the daily newspaper of the Workers’ Party, but different sectors of society might study different newspapers, such as the *Choson Inmingun Sinmun* (조선인민군), the daily of the Korean People’s Army, and *Chongnyon Chonwi* (청년전위), the “Youth Vanguard” newspaper of the Youth League.<sup>56</sup> There are also regional newspapers in many provinces and cities, such as the *Pyongyang Sinmun* (평양신문).<sup>57</sup>

“They have layers of education and brainwashing. Every day, every morning, people get together to have *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper readings. That’s the beginning of that education every day.”  
(Escapee 41)

At the meetings, participants get together to read and discuss issues presented. In practice, there is no critical discussion and participants praise the editorials and the work of Kim Jong-un. Often, they are expected to make pledges to support whatever issue is being discussed or they might have to learn the key points of a speech made by Kim Jong-un.

Every week, usually on Saturday mornings, most North Koreans are compelled to attend several hours of ideological training. These weekly lectures make up the cornerstone of the brainwashing system and are held across the country.

“Every week, they have recap meetings and that’s another way to clean their minds. Every week, they have lectures or they self study Kim’s works and teachings, such as his history and an-

56 “Mass Media Organs,” Naenara Website, June 27, 2018, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1563767504-829388437/mass-media-organs/>.

57 “Pyongyang Sinmun Marks 60<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day,” KCNA, May 31, 2017, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1496244656-855458791/pyongyang-sinmun-marks-60th-foundation-day/>.

*ti-guerrilla works. This is a regular procedure and every week, they have to do this on Saturday.”*  
(Escapee 41)

*“Every Saturday at the workplace lecture in the life review section, the Party secretary urged people not to watch movies and dramas featuring the enemy.”*  
(Escapee 17)

*“Every Wednesday at the work lecture, they told people that if we watched South Korean movies or dramas, we would soak into rotten and ill capitalism.”*  
(Escapee 16)

North Koreans typically attend a meeting based on whatever group they are a part of, such as the KWP, the Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League, the Trade Union, the Farmers' Union, and the Women's Union.<sup>58</sup> Everyone, from senior regime officials to the occupants of prison and labor camps, has to attend.<sup>59</sup>

*“At school every week, the youth league trained students not to watch capitalist videos.”*  
(Escapee 15)

Some of the meeting is devoted to studying revolutionary history or the works of Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il. None of the material is new. Participants will have learned it at school but through the meetings it is reinforced throughout their lifetimes.

The concern of the regime with the destabilizing aspects of foreign information can be seen in the more intense sessions faced by workers who have sanctioned exposure to foreign news, such as those in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the KCNA. They have to undergo such ideological study every three days rather than every week.<sup>60</sup>

## Lectures

The meetings also typically contain a lecture. The content of the lectures is based on materials passed down from the PAD so they follow and reinforce messaging in State media.<sup>61</sup>

For example, if the weather is bad and the crop-growing season is approaching, the PAD will take up the issue of water preservation.

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<sup>58</sup> Andrei Lankov, In-ok Kwak, and Choong-Bin Cho, *The Organizational Life: Daily Surveillance and Daily Resistance in North Korea*, Journal of East Asian Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2, May to August 2012, 195. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S1598240800007839>.

<sup>59</sup> COI, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the DPRK*, 354.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Escapee 41.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Escapee 33.

Television bulletins and newspaper reports will convey the poor growing conditions, highlighting the need to save water. Coverage will also be given to the harsh weather conditions, so citizens are pushed towards blaming the climate rather than State mismanagement. At the *inminban* meetings, these messages will be reinforced, perhaps through a communal drive to save water and residents will stand and pledge to cut their water usage. Households that waste water will be criticized at the meeting.

*“Once a week, there is a meeting organized by the various groups that people belong to. Sometimes, they'll have a study group on Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jong-il's works, and at other times, they receive agitation contents. They also have lectures during the events. So, a political officer will come out and say ‘if you do this or that then you'll get executed’ and ‘if you're watching this then you're being disloyal to Kim Jong-un.’ They continuously try to educate people. That's what North Korea has been doing for the past decades.”*  
(Escapee 26)

Like the “third broadcast network,” the lectures are closed and, thus, can deliver a harsher message to North Korean citizens than that delivered through the media. For example, in mid-2018 after a series of summit meetings with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, North Korea eased up on its public criticism of South Korea in State media.<sup>62</sup>

North Korea had refrained from harshly criticizing South Korea in public to avoid upsetting the improving diplomatic relations, but at weekly meetings, away from the international spotlight, harsher words were used, according to one report.

Citizens were told that “South Korea is a disease ridden, backward country” and “South Korea is a society controlled by money where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Robbers frequently kill for money, and even parents and their children will fight and kill each other for a few dollars.”<sup>63</sup>

Of course, the lectures also include regular warnings on the evils of foreign content and criticism of neighbors who were caught with it.

*“A lecturer regularly visits and gives talks. They will talk about something that's in the newspaper, such as the need to protect Kim Jong-un, or repeat the ideology. There's another lecture series given by the Ministry for State Security. These lectures are focused more on how to stop the information influx. They tell people not to use Chinese smartphones. If you use Chinese smartphones then information can flow in, but information can also flow out to China. They also tell people not to listen to Radio Free Asia or broadcasts by South Korean organizations. In some cases, they tell people not to*

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<sup>62</sup> Based on the author's monitoring of Korean Central Television.

<sup>63</sup> Kim Yoo-jin, “North Korean lectures describe South Korea as ‘disease-ridden, backward country,’” *Daily NK*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-lectures-describe-sk-as-a-disease-ridden-backward-country/>.

## Martyn Williams

use Kakao Talk, and sometimes, they gave examples, such as saying somebody was using a Samsung smartphone and got executed." (Escapee 25)

Many escapees talk of their boredom in such sessions, as might be expected of people so dissatisfied with their homeland that they risked their lives to leave. It does appear that after exposure to enough foreign content people can hit a turning point from which no amount of lecturing will return them.

They regularly conduct lectures warning people about the consequences [of watching foreign content] but once your mind is set, once you feel betrayed, there's nothing they can really say to stop you. That's because they're not even helping you, they're not even giving you food." (Escapee 27)

One escapee even said that sometimes, lecturers warned against watching North Korean content that had fallen out of favor.

"At my school and another organization I was part of, they gave me instructions not to watch Chinese and Korean films. They also instructed me not to watch the North Korean films produced by Jang Song-taek or featuring actors that were raised by Jang Song-taek."<sup>64</sup> (Escapee 28)

## Self-criticism

An important part of the regime's ideological education is self-criticism sessions (*생활총화* or *saenghwal chonghwa*). As one of the fundamental building blocks of the ideological and social control system, everybody must take part.<sup>65</sup>

In the sessions, participants criticize themselves and their colleagues or classmates in the ways they have failed to live up to the Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology (TPMI). The principles came from Kim Il-sung in 1974 and all North Koreans are expected to know them by heart.<sup>66</sup>

The requirement to attend self-criticism sessions is spelled out in sub-principle five of the fourth of the TPMI.

"Participate without absence in more than 2 hours of study groups, lectures and collective studies devoted to revolutionary ideas of Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung, ensure discipline for these

studies and make these studies a habitual part of daily life, at the same time struggling with any contradictions or neglect towards ensuring such studies are always completed."<sup>67</sup>

Usually, the admitted offense is a small one, such as not trying hard enough when carrying out their communal neighborhood duties.

"There was a weekly lecture meeting where everyone gathered together and people said what they did bad during the week in front of everyone else. For example, if you were late for work or if you missed work, then you would confess. It would be a minor thing. If you miss too much work or are late for work several times, then, for example, you are forced to do the cleaning." (Escapee 31)

Once you make an admission, the reason for the failing will be discussed and the speaker is expected to make a commitment to try harder.<sup>68</sup>

Then, before they are allowed to take their seat, they are expected to pick one of their colleagues, neighbors, or friends and criticize them for a perceived failing. This can have a chilling effect on the lives of citizens because it is not just the authorities people have to look out for, but also their own neighbors and colleagues.

By constantly having to measure yourself, your colleagues, and friends against the TPMI, their directives are subconsciously reinforced.

Most citizens take part in weekly sessions, however; those in artistic fields have to do it every other day because they have relatively greater freedom of expression than others. Farmers do it once every ten days to fit in with the North Korean farming cycle.

## Outdoor Media

The brainwashing continues outside of the home. On the Pyongyang Metro, pages from the day's newspapers are displayed for riders to read as Metro stations and buses send a stream of propaganda through speakers.<sup>69</sup>

Propaganda posters and slogans are also dotted around town, highlighting current State campaigns.

In the last few years, a number of large public electronic screens have been erected. They are used to relay Korean Central Television

<sup>64</sup> Jang was the uncle of Kim Jong-un, who put him to death in 2013 for corruption.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Collins, *Denied from the Start, Human Rights at the Local Level in North Korea*, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Jieun Baek, *North Korea's Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground Is Transforming a Closed Society* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Robert Collins, *Denied from the Start, Human Rights at the Local Level in North Korea*, 23.

<sup>68</sup> Andrei Lankov, In-ok Kwak, and Choong-Bin Cho, *The Organizational Life: Daily Surveillance and Daily Resistance in North Korea*, Journal of East Asian Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2, May to August 2012, 195. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S1598240800007839>.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Escapee 41.

(KCTV) whenever it broadcasts special bulletins about Kim Jong-un. At least six are known to exist:

1. In the square outside Pyongyang's main railway station
2. Near Mansudae Hill in Pyongyang
3. On Mirae Street in Pyongyang
4. In the main square in Sinuiju
5. In the main square at Rason
6. At the Masik Ryong Ski Resort

Recently, electronic signboards have also begun appearing around Pyongyang. The boards can be used to display a message that remains bright in both sunlight and at night thanks to the hundreds of LEDs that make up the sign. The adoption of digital technology also offers the regime a new opportunity: messages can be updated much more quickly and much more easily than propaganda posters or slogans painted on billboards.<sup>70</sup>

## Refreshing KCTV

In the last five years, the North Korean State has embarked on a series of changes at KCTV that are apparently designed to make it more aesthetically appealing.

KCTV rarely broadcasts any foreign content and is typically very slow in innovating. This is probably due to the multiple layers of bureaucracy and approval that are needed for even the slightest changes.

As a result, its programming holds less interest with viewers who are becoming accustomed to more visually interesting content from South Korea and China.

*"They may try to change the story lines, but it's already so outdated so people in North Korea don't find them entertaining. All those videos produced by KCTV are focused on how Kim Jong-un or the Party are helping them. But in reality, North Korean society has already become such a market economy that people are focused on living on the markets. For these people, Kim Jong-un has barely done anything."*  
(Jung Gwang-il, Founder and President, No Chain for North Korea)

The biggest change in recent years came on December 4, 2017, when KCTV began broadcasting in high definition. It required viewers to have a compatible television set and live within a digital transmission area, which likely only covers Pyongyang.

As of mid-2019, all news programming is carried in high definition. Documentaries on North Korean history or the Kim family are now also produced in high definition but no matter the subject and presentation style it still suffers from a fatal flaw: KCTV's programming

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<sup>70</sup> Colin Zwirko on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/ColinZwirko/status/1178501030150995968>.

is dry, propaganda-heavy and cannot compete with more interesting content from overseas.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, KCTV does appear to be slowly softening its approach.

*"They used to shout out to people as if it was propaganda, but now, they're speaking more softly. I also noticed that North Korean TV is producing comedy shows so it seems like the North Korean government is trying to change bit-by-bit. But this could be more of a response to Kim Jong-un's personality because he wants North Korean TV to be more presentable to the outside world."* (Escapee 25)

Some of the more recent changes happened in early 2019 in news presentation. They include the use of infographics, which had not been seen on KCTV until then, and more complex perspective shots in field reports. The changes had the effect of making the reports more visually engaging and helped in understanding the underlying propaganda message that factory production was on the way up.



Figure 3: An infographic of the "Ratio of Production of High-Quality Goods" on KCTV on May 8, 2019.

One indicator that the updates were perhaps too much for some viewers was when KCTV tried and then stopped using a virtual set that gave the appearance the anchor was sitting in a control room.<sup>72</sup>

A few weeks later, the weather bulletin, which always followed the main news, was updated. Now, a weather forecaster stands in front of

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<sup>71</sup> Martyn Williams, "KCTV Gets a Widescreen, Stereo Update," North Korea Tech, December 5, 2017, <https://www.northkoreatech.org/2017/12/05/kctv-widescreen-stereo-high-definition/>.

<sup>72</sup> Martyn Williams, "KCTV tries a new look for the news but the content stays the same," North Korea Tech, March 25, 2019, <https://www.northkoreatech.org/2019/03/25/kctv-tries-a-new-look-for-the-news-but-the-content-stays-the-same/>.

# THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF MONOLITHIC IDEOLOGY

1. Struggle with all your life to paint the entire society with the one color of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung's revolutionary thought.
2. Respect and revere highly and with loyalty the Great Leader Kim Il-sung.
3. Make absolute the authority of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung.
4. Accept the Great Leader Kim Il-sung's revolutionary thought as your belief and take the Great Leader's instructions as your creed.
5. Observe absolutely the principle of unconditional execution in carrying out the instructions of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung.
6. Rally the unity of ideological intellect and revolutionary solidarity around the Great Leader Kim Il-sung.
7. Learn from the Great Leader Kim Il-sung and master communist dignity, the methods of revolutionary projects, and the people's work styles.
8. Preserve dearly the political life the Great Leader Kim Il-sung has bestowed upon you, and repay loyally for the Great Leader's boundless political trust and considerations with high political awareness and skill.
9. Establish a strong organizational discipline so that the entire Party, the entire people, and the entire military will operate uniformly under the sole leadership of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung.
10. The great revolutionary accomplishments pioneered by the Great Leader Kim Il-sung must be succeeded and perfected by hereditary successions until the end.

a television and motions to explain the weather and charts have been updated to make the forecasts clearer.<sup>73,74</sup>



Figure 4: A weather forecaster on KCTV on May 28, 2019.

## Case Study: North Korean Television News Coverage of World News

One sometimes overlooked aspect of North Korea's response to foreign media is the information concerning the outside world that it provides to its own people. Foreign news makes up a small part of official media output, but it can be found in newspapers, on the radio, and on television. Through the coverage vetted and chosen by the PAD, we can see the picture of the world that the Party wants its citizens to believe.

As with all aspects of North Korean media output, foreign news coverage is heavily controlled and censored. It typically takes two to three days for news events to appear in State media, although it can sometimes take even longer.

The PAD's control over output was vividly seen in coverage of Kim Jong-un's international diplomacy in 2018 and 2019. On the occasion of the Panmunjom summit and South Korean President Moon Jae-In's visit to Pyongyang, the world watched live videos and images, while North Koreans saw nothing.

This is likely because even though Kim Jong-un was involved, the outcome of the events was unclear and so, the PAD could not decide in advance how it would be presented to the North Korean

people. In the end, news of both meetings was broadcast a day after it happened, which is typical. The delay also helps with maximum media input as the same story can lead newspapers as well as radio and television news bulletins.



Figure 5: From top right, anti-clockwise: South Korea's KBS, SBS, MBC, China's CCTV-4, South Korea's Arirang TV, the BBC World, CNN International, and Japan's NHK all carrying live coverage of the handshake at Panmunjom between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. In the center, a KCTV testcard that North Koreans saw if they had their television sets switched on at that time.

Outside of special coverage, foreign news on KCTV is angled heavily towards natural disasters, conflict, and human suffering. Throughout its 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. news bulletins, KCTV paints a picture of a world in constant chaos.

For example, in the afternoon of May 30, 2019, in a bulletin led by a report on people around the world admiring Kim Jong-un and the modernization at the Pyongyang Dental Sanitary Goods Plant, KCTV presented the following items of world news:<sup>75</sup>

- A volcano erupted on Bali Island in Indonesia. Video shows the volcano in a mountain.
- The Iranian Foreign Minister criticizes the United States' arms buildup in the Middle East region. Video shows the minister speaking at a meeting.
- A knife-related crime recently takes place in Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan. Video footage shows the crime scene.
- Northern Peru is hit by a 7.5-magnitude earthquake. Video footage shows an affected area.
- Oklahoma is affected by a tornado. Video footage shows the affected area.

<sup>73</sup> Martyn Williams, "KCTV refreshes its weather forecast presentation," *North Korea Tech*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.northkoreatech.org/2019/04/30/kctv-refreshes-weather-forecast-presentation/>.

<sup>74</sup> Martyn Williams, "More changes for North Korean TV's weather forecast," *North Korea Tech*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.northkoreatech.org/2019/05/29/more-changes-for-north-korean-tvs-weather-broadcast/>.

<sup>75</sup> Based on the author's monitoring of Korean Central Television via satellite.



Figure 6: Emergency workers are seen caring for a victim of a stabbing in Japan during a KCTV news broadcast on May 30, 2019.

To get a better handle on what KCTV shows North Koreans of the world, foreign news broadcast in the 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. news bulletins were studied and cataloged by the author for one year, from June 1, 2018 to May 31, 2019. Each foreign news item broadcast was classified by country, subject, and length.

The study ignored foreign news items with a North Korean link as those stories are an extension of domestic propaganda rather than legitimate world news. For example, reports concerning the publication of North Korean propaganda works (e.g.: “Kim Jong-il’s classic works is published as a book in Russia on the occasion of the Day of the Sun”); the activities of Korean friendship groups (e.g.: “A Czech group issues a statement on 9 May positively reviewing Kim Jong-un’s recent visit to Russia”); and activities carried out by the pro-North Korean “Chongryon” group in Japan. Similarly, Kim Jong-un’s diplomatic trips overseas were not included.

In the 12 months of broadcasts covered, KCTV aired 388 foreign news items on 140 days. Of these, 346 were broadcast in the 5:00 p.m. news bulletin and the remaining 42 made it into the more important 8:00 p.m. bulletin.

By subject country, more coverage was devoted to South Korea than any other nation. The South Korean news items typically covered political scandals, labor unrest, and criticism of the government and politicians. This furthers the State message that South Korea is not a more desirable place to live.

It is a message that the State continually pushes, although, after so much exposure to South Korean television dramas that portray a more stylish, richer lifestyle, the real impact of this negative news is questionable.

Much of the news in the 8:00 p.m. bulletin concerned South Korea and since August 2018, when preparations were underway for another summit, North Korean television almost completely stopped carrying any news about South Korea.

After South Korea, most coverage was devoted to China, Iran, and Russia.

Political coverage accounted for 165 reports, or 42 percent of all foreign news by story. The majority of the stories showed the dissatisfaction of the South Korean people with their leaders. Subjects included demonstrations by citizens and labor organizations, scandals in political parties, and the wartime use of Korean sex slaves by the Japanese.

Something interesting happened in August 2018 that illustrates how North Korea distorts the news to its gain. Shortly after it was announced that President Moon Jae-In would travel to Pyongyang for the third inter-Korean summit, negative news about South Korea disappeared from State television screens.

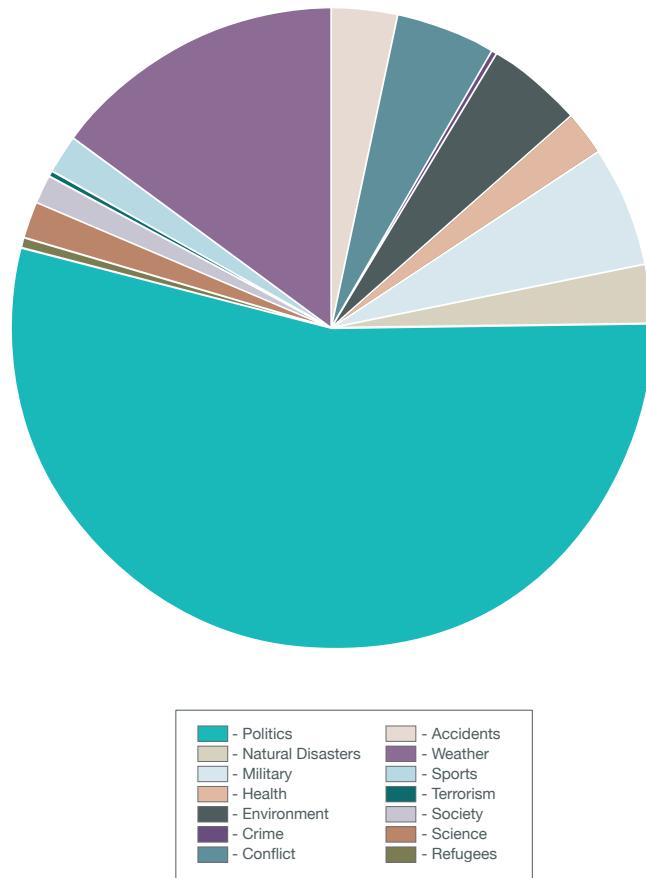
What had been an almost everyday occurrence came to a halt on August 22, 2018, when State television reported on the (South) Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in dispute with a local company over anti-union moves. Only six reports concerning South Korea aired over the following nine months.

The dominance of political news can be more vividly seen when we look at the amount of time KCTV devoted to coverage.

Over the 12-month period under study, political news stories in the two bulletins totaled 1 hour, 58 minutes, and 14 seconds of coverage. That represents 54 percent of the 3 hours and 37 minutes spent covering foreign news.

In contrast, the second most-covered subject, the weather, accumulated just 32 minutes and 29 seconds of screen time.

Subject	Time
Accidents	0:07:16
Conflict	0:10:58
Crime	0:00:35
Environment	0:10:33
Health	0:04:52
Military	0:13:18
Natural Disasters	0:06:28
Politics	1:58:14
Refugees	0:01:10
Science	0:04:01
Society	0:03:09
Sports	0:00:40
Terrorism	0:04:14
Weather	0:32:29



Reports covering South Korea were subtly different from other foreign news in their almost exclusive use of still imagery to illustrate stories. In contrast, all other foreign news was often accompanied with video which painted a much more graphic picture of the calamity being reported on.

The remainder of the political news coverage focused heavily on China, Russia, and Iran. North Korean television viewers saw nothing of Brexit, the U.S. mid-term elections, or the European Union elections in May 2019.

The next largest chunk of news was weather-related and helped deliver a message that life is not perfect around the world, and that North Korea is not alone in suffering from weather-related disasters. A total of 79 reports (20 percent of coverage) was devoted to damage from heavy snow, forest fires, floods, landslides, and other natural disasters. This was the most diverse in terms of regional coverage with reports on severe weather in 33 countries.

An additional 16 reports covered natural disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, and 14 reports looked at wider environmental

issues, such as global warming. Taken together, these three areas make up 28 percent of all foreign news coverage.

Twenty-five reports covered wars and conflicts, mostly focused on Palestine and Gaza that always portrayed Israel as the aggressor. The related terrorism coverage was focused on Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

Other notable coverage included several stories on an Ebola outbreak in the Congo, U.S. border guards shooting tear gas into Mexico, and an increase in the number of homeless people dying in the United Kingdom.

Subject	Number of Reports
Politics	165
Weather	79
Conflicts	25
Accidents	21
Military	21
Natural Disasters	16
Environment	14
Health	14
Terrorism	11
Science	9
Society	7
Refugees	3
Crime	2
Sports	1

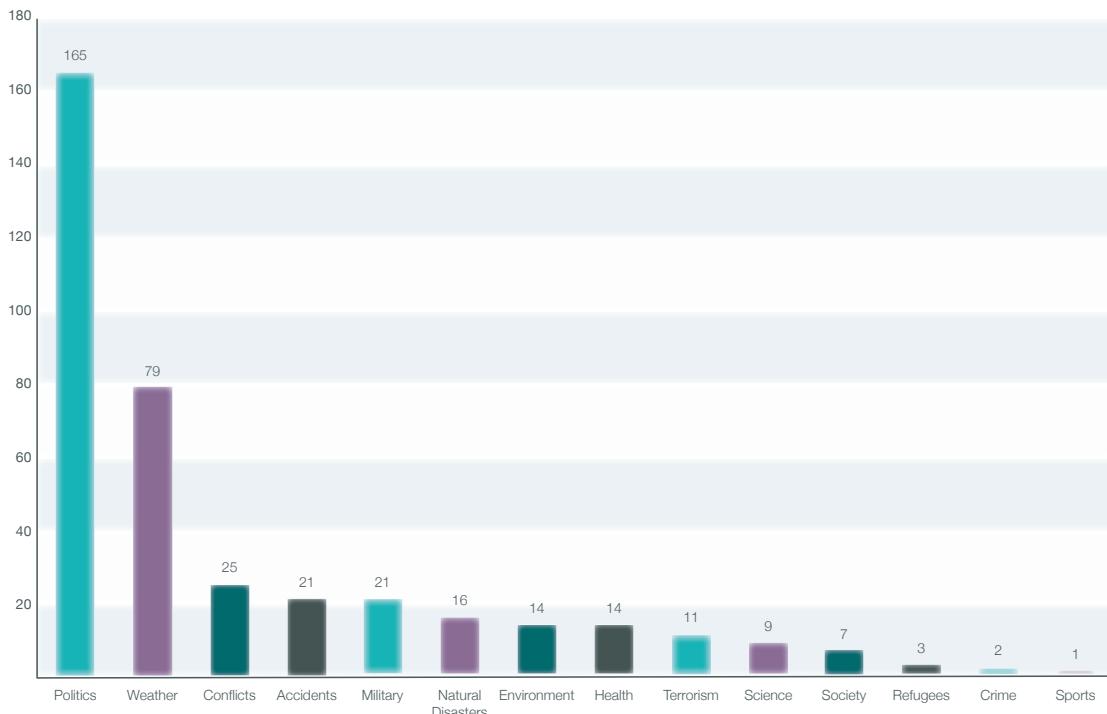
## Ideology from Birth

In considering the impact of foreign content and North Korea's fight against it, it is important to recognize that the indoctrination of North Korean minds begins shortly after birth. North Koreans technically enter the ideological education system at the age of five when they join the Youth League, but in reality, their young minds are conditioned from a much earlier age.

"There isn't really a specific age when people become part of the system. Because once you start learning the language, it naturally flows into your brain. For example, in North Korea when a baby is born and when you teach them Korean, you'll motion at the portraits and say this is Kim Il-sung and this is Kim Jong-il. Sometimes you'll ask the kids who these people are, and if the kids reply saying it's the supreme leader then everybody claps. That's how it gets in people's minds."  
(Escapee 30)

At school, this is reinforced in several ways. Not only are there formal lessons on the lives of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, but there are also constant reminders everywhere else.

"Once you enter kindergarten then there is a basic ideological education. It's instilled in people's minds through songs about Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and they try to make kids become thankful for Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Even when they have lunch, they force the kids to say thank you Kim Il-sung for the food that we have."  
(Escapee 30)



On different objects around the school, students might see a little red sticker that says it is a gift from the Supreme Leader. This one on a computer monitor, seen in 2002, notes “*위대한령도자 김정일동지께서 배려하여 주신 선물*,” or that it is “A gift received with appreciation from Comrade Great Leader Kim Jong-il.”



Figure 7: A red sticker on this computer monitor tells the child it was a gift from Kim Jong-il. (2002).

With such a message, the State is reinforcing that the leader himself is looking out for them and providing for them. This is a constant theme in North Korean propaganda and one that the State constantly has to reinforce in the face of foreign content that teaches citizens the truth about the Supreme Leader and his family.

And in this page from a middle school English-language textbook, students are introduced to music with a reminder that the Moranbong Theatre was “newly rebuilt under the warm care of the great leader Marshal Kim Jong Il.”

### 1 Discussion and listening Music all around us

#### 1.1 Music and you

Look at the picture. Have you ever enjoyed an orchestral music ‘A Bumper Harvest in the Chongsan Plain’ at the Moranbong Theatre newly rebuilt under the warm care of the great leader Marshal **Kim Jong Il**?

Read these questions. Tell the class what you think.

- What type of music do you like?
- What type of music don't you like?
- Do you ever buy cassettes or CDs?
- How has your taste in music changed?

#### 1.2 Musical instruments

Do you play a musical instrument?  
What instrument would you like to play?

Can you match the correct name to the pictures?



Figure 8: “Middle School English,” Foreign Language Book Publishing House, 2011 Edition, 69.

### 4 Writing Decide... Across cultures

Choose an exercise.

#### 4.1 A quiz

Write a quiz with ten questions about the US imperialists invasion of our country. You can test your quiz with other students in your class.

#### 4.2 The massacre of Sinchon

How many people were killed by the US imperialists only in Sinchon County during the 52 days of their occupation?

How did they kill 102 children and 400 mothers?

What does the Sinchon

Museum lay bare?

Can we live with the US imperialists under the same sky?

If not, why?



Do some research and find out.  
Write about the information you find.

Figure 9: “Middle School English,” Foreign Language Book Publishing House, 2011 Edition, 91.

Not every lesson in the book is taught through such North Korea-inspired subjects, but they are scattered throughout and indicative of the pervasive nature of State propaganda.

“The core of North Korea’s education system is emphasizing how great the leaders are. Of course, there are other branches and other subjects, but the focus is highlighting the oneness of society, the juche philosophy, or customs. But even when you’re teaching ordinary customs, such as doing something well for your parents, they don’t just say you should respect your parents. They say you should do it because Kim Il-sung respected his parents. That’s how they teach them.”  
(Escapee 30)

Outside of school, indoctrination does not relent. Even the children’s cartoons on television further ideological messaging, thanks to the expansive reach of the PAD.

For example, one recent series featured a family of peaceful rabbits fighting off the evil wolf who was continually threatening them. The wolf is commonly used to represent Americans in North Korean propaganda and the symbolism is obvious to viewers.



Figure 10: "Brothers and Rabbits 2, Rabbit's skiing," April 26 Children's Film Studio via KCTV, May 29, 2019.

After graduation, the ideological classes do not stop. North Koreans will continue to study the same ideological texts they studied at school in addition to receiving a new education.

"When you leave university or the school system then these classes continue within the organization that you're part of, such as the Party League, Youth League, Workers League or the Women's League."  
(Escapee 30)

And this continues throughout the entire life of every North Korean. A relentless, daily onslaught designed to keep minds from questioning the system. This is one reason why it is extremely difficult to change the North Korean system.

"It is crumbling slowly but you can't underestimate the effect of the education that people have had since they were very young. All that propaganda and agitation they've received is still deeply ingrained in there."  
(Escapee 40)



Figure 11: "Brothers and Rabbits 2, Rabbit's skiing," April 26 Children's Film Studio via KCTV, May 29, 2019.

## SECTION 7: TECHNOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE INFLUX OF FOREIGN MEDIA

Among all of the tools at the State's disposal against the spread of foreign media, none have advanced as much in the last few years as the technological ones.

While the digitization of media was the catalyst that led to the mass spread of foreign content across the country, so too has the same technology been employed to help the regime combat it.

In the early days of the digital revolution, the regime reacted to new technology in a fairly direct way: it banned it. It was an immediate solution to the problem, but not a long-term one. Not only would technology products inevitably get smuggled into the country, but the North Korean citizens themselves could also gain from some of the advances in technology that the State had banned, such as wireless computer networking. A domestic ban would also further emphasize the differences between North and South Korea among citizens watching smuggled movies and television dramas.

The regime worked to modify how the technology could be used and deployed it in a controlled manner.

Examples of this include cellular networks and WiFi technology, both of which were introduced, banned, and later reintroduced with additional restrictions. Recently, some technologies such as Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) streaming have been introduced with strict State control from the beginning.

The pattern is clear. The North Korean State is getting increasingly sophisticated in the way it controls and engineers digital technology.

### Preventing Foreign Radio and Television Reception

For several decades the North Korean State employed a relatively simple procedure to prevent citizens from accessing uncensored foreign radio and television stations: it fixed receivers so they cannot be tuned away from North Korean stations.

With analog sets, this was easy because the tuning mechanism would either be physically disabled or have a sticker put over the

dial to prevent it from being moved. Officials would check that the sticker was still in place during random checks on homes.

To circumvent these checks, which are still in place, many North Koreans have a second radio or television that has not been declared to authorities and retains its ability to receive foreign broadcasts, such as the Korean-language broadcasts by Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, the BBC, and KBS.

As a second line of defense against foreign radio, the North Korean State maintains a network of high-powered jamming transmitters that are on the air around the clock to block reception of a handful of foreign shortwave broadcasters.

This brute-force approach involves transmitting loud noise on the same frequency as a foreign radio or television signal to overpower it so citizens cannot hear or watch it.

Targets include the aforementioned stations and two operated by South Korea's National Intelligence Service: *Voice of the People* and *Echo of Hope*.

The effectiveness of the jamming depends on the location of the listener and atmospheric conditions. In general, mediumwave and shortwave broadcasts travel further distances at night and are more easily heard than during the day. This corresponds to many people's off-work hours, so most radio broadcasting is concentrated on the evening and over-night hours. On nights when conditions are favorable, foreign stations can be heard more easily over the jamming but a clear signal is rare. This is, however, the only way to get live programming and daily news and information into the country.

A 2015 survey of 103 North Korean escapees conducted by the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau found that 14 percent said they listened to foreign radio every day. A further 46 percent said they listened at least weekly and 33 percent at least monthly.<sup>76</sup>

The jamming operation is effective at disrupting reception, but cracks are appearing. In recent years, foreign broadcasters have brought more transmitters on the air simultaneously, sometimes overpowering North Korea's ability to block all transmissions. For example, of the six frequencies used by *Voice of the People*, an anti-regime station operated by South Korea's National Intelligence Service, at least one is usually free of jamming.

The chronic shortage of electricity in North Korea also means that jamming will occasionally be absent.

However, despite this considerable effort by the North Korean authorities to block foreign radio, the generational shift among North Koreans might be reducing the influence of radio anyway.

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76 Nat Kretchun et al., *Compromising Connectivity*, 6.

## Martyn Williams

The InterMedia survey found that the largest group of listeners to foreign radio were in the 35–44-years-old age group (41 percent) with the second largest from 45 to 54-years-old (35 percent). Among 15–24-year-olds, listenership was just two percent.

For younger North Koreans, digital video content is proving to be more compelling.

North Korean consumption of foreign television is less common, in part because the signals do not travel as far into the country. However, some escapees reported directly watching Chinese television.

*"In North Korea, if you buy a TV, you have to get the channels fixed, but I didn't. I secretly kept it and watched Chinese TV stations, especially the ones in Yanbian. I could watch Chinese movies on those stations. If you get caught watching those TV shows without fixing the channels, then you can get sent to a labor camp, but it's your choice whether to risk it or not."*

(Escapee 31)

The Yanbian Autonomous Region borders North Korea's northern border. *Yanbian TV* (연변라지오TV넷 / 延边广播电视台) broadcasts a Korean-language television and radio channel. Among its programming is a world news bulletin that delivers global news in Korean.

A 2015 survey of 305 North Korean travelers and escapees reported that 75 percent said they had watched foreign broadcasts in South Hwanghae Province, which borders South Korea. In Pyongyang, the level is at 13 percent.

North Korea has since started its own digital television broadcasts, but uses the digital video broadcasting - second generation terrestrial (DVB-T2) format, which is incompatible with the Advanced Television Systems Committee (ATSC) used in South Korea and digital terrestrial multimedia broadcast (DTMB) used in China. Unlike analog sets, digital sets cannot be adjusted to other formats so North Koreans with domestic sets cannot tune into overseas broadcasts.

## Cellular Networks

### Domestic Networks

North Korea's first experience with mobile cellular technology was in 2002, when a network was launched in the Rajin-Sonbong economic zone near the borders with Russia and China, and later nationwide. Based on the European global system for mobile communications

(GSM) standard, the network was started by Bangkok-based Loxley Pacific, which won a government license in 1998.<sup>77</sup>

The service was expensive and there was no mobile data available, but it attracted thousands of subscribers before being abruptly shut down by North Korean authorities a year and a half after it began in May 2004. The reason for the sudden closure was never disclosed. However, it occurred less than a month after a huge explosion at a railway yard in Ryongchon near the Chinese border.<sup>78</sup>

The explosion, which leveled a large part of the surrounding town and killed hundreds, occurred a few hours after a special train carrying Kim Jong-il had traveled through the area. Several reports concluded that the explosion was the result of an accident, but a rumor spread that it was an assassination attempt triggered by a cell phone. Whether or not this is the truth, it seemed to be enough to spook the authorities as to the potential misuse of technology. They shut down the public cellular service shortly afterwards.

However, the regime had clearly recognized the potential of cellular technology and a few years later, reached a deal with Egypt's Orascom Telecom to launch a new network. Orascom formed a joint venture with the Korea Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (KPTC) and in late 2008, launched Koryolink, a 3G network operator that is still in business today.

It follows the model of North Korea's fixed-line telephone network and is separated into two halves. On one side are the phones used by North Korean citizens that will make and accept calls from other citizens and access the domestic intranet. The other side is used by foreigners, who have the ability to make and receive international calls and access the Internet.

The firewall between the two user groups is specifically designed to stop the flow of information both into and out of the country. Domestic subscribers are not able to place calls to people who have the ability to speak with anyone outside of the country. Conversely, those with the freedom to communicate around the world cannot access North Korea's controlled domestic network.

This arrangement is set at the account level, but also revealed in the phone numbers assigned to users. Phones issued to foreigners have numbers beginning with 191-250, while those for Koreans were initially prefixed with 191-260. The phone number base for Koreans has since expanded greatly as the network has attracted several million subscriptions and includes other 191-2XX numbers and 191-3XX numbers.

As a further means of information control, North Korea had required tourists to surrender their phones upon entering the country, but

77 "DPRK to open mobile service in early 2003," *Xinhua News*, December 16, 2002.

78 "Thailand urges N. Korea to lift mobile phone ban," *Kyodo News*, August 29, 2005.

in 2013 began allowing them to purchase Subscriber Identification Module (SIM) cards offering international calling and Internet access.

This brought with it a likely unanticipated problem. Once they had left North Korea, the tourists had no reason to worry about North Korean laws and it appears that some of these SIM cards made their way back into the country. North Koreans, armed with unlocked smartphones, would be able to access the Internet using them.

The regime responded in 2014 with a new stipulation that tourist SIM cards are deactivated when the tourists leave the country. The tourists are still allowed to take the physical card with them but all remaining credit and active phone number and data service are canceled.<sup>79</sup>

Hand-in-hand with the account-level restrictions, Koryolink cell towers sometimes only accept connections from one type of account to provide a geographical restriction on where certain calls can be made. Foreigners have reported that in areas outside of Pyongyang their phones sometimes lose service while their guide's phone on the domestic side of the network has a good signal.

In 2017, one report said some Koryolink SIM cards previously issued to foreigners had been blocked from connecting to towers near the Chinese border because they offered international service.<sup>80</sup>

## Cell Phone Use in the Border Areas

Signals from Chinese cellular networks present a particular problem for the authorities because they effortlessly traverse the border and reach several kilometers inside North Korea, bringing with them a window into the outside world.

North Korea's own telephone network is highly controlled and most of the country's 1.2 million fixed-line phones and 5 million cellular phones are unable to call anywhere except for other domestic numbers.<sup>81</sup>

With access to a Chinese cellular signal and a smuggled phone with a Chinese SIM card, North Koreans have the ability to call any number in the world and can get unrestricted Internet access.

In response, the North Korean authorities are both jamming the cellular signals and attempting to locate people making calls.

The jamming operations are concentrated near population centers along the border, such as Sinuiju, Manpo, Hysean, and Hoeryong. This requires citizens to travel several kilometers up or down river in order to receive a Chinese signal, according to reports. In some cases, citizens will climb hills in remote regions to catch weak signals from Chinese networks.<sup>82</sup>

Like the previously mentioned radio station jamming, cellular jamming broadcasts noise on the same frequency as legitimate cellular signals so phones cannot receive them. The operations are primarily taking place around cities because of the greater number of people there, according to reports.

Sometimes, North Korean authorities will switch the jamming off, which immediately makes it much easier for city-dwelling North Koreans to receive Chinese cellular signals, but there is a catch. If citizens are lulled into a false sense of security and make calls, the authorities will use direction-finding equipment to try and locate them.

The direction-finding equipment is expensive, sensitive gear from Germany's Rohde & Schwarz that was imported into North Korea in 2008 under the guise of an anti-surveillance system to protect its new Koryolink 3G network.<sup>83</sup>

It can detect the radio waves emitted by cell phones and the location of the call can be determined if several teams work together to triangulate it.

The work is done by a unit often referred to as Bureau 27, but sometimes escapees refer to it as Bureau 12 or Bureau 15. It is unclear if these are the same unit or different units focused on the same issue.

As a result, citizens must go to considerable lengths to protect themselves. Simply using a phone at home with the curtains drawn is not enough. Phones must be kept switched off when not being used as even a dormant phone regularly pings cell towers. When calls are being made, they are often kept to less than two minutes in length to interrupt triangulation. Some users will travel into the country-side or climb a hill, where they might get a better signal, while also having a better lookout post for anyone approaching.

However, there is a problem. While the system can detect cell phones, it cannot always tell if it is from a phone connected to a Chinese network or a legitimate call on the North Korean network. At least one report said that this had led authorities to raid the homes of legitimate callers.

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<sup>79</sup> Martyn Williams, "Koryolink moves to plug censorship loophole," *North Korea Tech*, September 2, 2014, <https://www.northkoreatech.org/2014/09/02/koryolink-moves-to-plug-censorship-loophole/>.

<sup>80</sup> Kang Mi-jin, "North Korea targets specific SIM cards in crackdown," *Daily NK*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-targets-specific-sim-c/>.

<sup>81</sup> International Telecommunications Union, ITU-D Statistics, June 2019, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

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<sup>82</sup> Kim Joon-ho, "North Korea Expands Jamming, Surveillance of Chinese Cell Phones," *Radio Free Asia*, July 3, 2014, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/jamming-07032014143126.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Martyn Williams, "North Korea's Koryolink: Built for Surveillance and Control," *38 North*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/07/mwilliams072219/>.

To improve their chances of catching people using illicit phones, the North Korean authorities have reportedly resorted to tactics such as periodically shutting off the country's legitimate wireless network. Doing that would force all North Korean phones offline, so the only signals on air would be from handsets on Chinese networks.<sup>84, 85, 86</sup>

Because of all the limits imposed by the need to stay secret, cross-border connections on Chinese cell phones are mostly used for short phone calls between escapees already overseas and their families still in North Korea or by traders sending text messages to their counterparts in China.

It has recently been reported that North Koreans have begun using the Chinese WeChat messaging app as a way to avoid North Korean State surveillance. The app is still open to Chinese government surveillance, but it is unclear how much the Chinese government cares to monitor North Korean messages or pass that information on to the North Korean authorities.<sup>87</sup>

The report also mentioned that WeChat was being used to send video content to North Korean users. The message app imposes a 100MB limit on files so the videos can only be a few minutes long, but this could be a first step towards the use of wireless networks to get content into the country. Doing so would remove the need to cross the physical border between the two countries and make the import of illicit content a safer, albeit still risky, operation.

The main limiting factor now is the time needed to download a longer video file such as a movie. These are typically around 1-2 gigabytes in size, which can take up to several tens of minutes on current networks depending on the signal. The coming introduction of 5G technology by Chinese carriers will make this considerably faster. However, at 5G, phones will likely use new frequency bands and their signals could stand out more.

If data networks are used for cross-border information distribution, it can be expected that North Korean authorities will clamp down further on the use of phones near the border.

## Technological Blocks on Smartphones and PCs

In networked repressive states, a common way of controlling what the population does online is to implement controls at the network level. As can be seen in countries such as China and Iran, these can be used to block connections to certain websites, censor certain keywords, and generally keep track of what people do online.

In North Korea, the State has much greater control of the network. The entire infrastructure is State-run and the security services are heavily integrated in the running of the telecommunications network.

This gives the regime complete visibility of all network traffic. Even if the built-in encryption is used in North Korea's Naenara web browser, the State can still surveil traffic because it issued the encryption keys.

This level of network control means that the domestic intranet is off limits for any sort of distribution of illicit content.

The State's media control does not stop at the network.

Over the last decade, the regime has gotten increasingly sophisticated at clamping down on PCs and smartphones. It has proven adept at reacting to the potential freedoms such digital devices can bring and subverted open-source software to prevent citizens from exploiting those freedoms.

The system is comprehensive and appears to be very successful. Computer security engineers have called North Korea's PC software "a surveillance mess and a privacy nightmare."<sup>88</sup>

The software first appeared as part of North Korea's Red Star OS, a home-grown variant of the Linux operating system. Version 3 of the software, available since mid-2013, included several applications that tracked user activity and attempted to prevent the viewing of unauthorized media files. It also included routines that checked the integrity of system files to ensure they had not been tampered with.<sup>89</sup>

About a year before the debut of Red Star OS version 3, similar applications were pushed on North Korean smartphone users.

At their debut in late 2008, North Korean cell phones were versatile devices that allowed owners to play back media files, including those illicitly smuggled into the country. Their small size made them

84 Moon Sung-hui, "North Korea Temporarily Closes Telecom Towers to Nab Chinese Mobile Users," *Radio Free Asia*, December 16, 2014, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/crackdown-12152014134428.html>.

85 "N.Korea clamping down on people making phone calls with South Koreans: sources," *Yonhap News*, March 29, 2016, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20160329004300315>.

86 Ibid., 81.

87 Mun Dong-hui, "North Koreans turn to WeChat for videos and cross-border communication," *Daily NK*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-turn-to-wechat-for-videos-and-cross-border-communication/>.

88 Florian Grunow at Chaos Computer Club Congress, "Lifting the Fog on Red Star OS," December 27, 2015, [https://media.ccc.de/v/32c3-7174-lifting\\_the\\_fog\\_on\\_red\\_star\\_os/related](https://media.ccc.de/v/32c3-7174-lifting_the_fog_on_red_star_os/related).

89 Ibid., 85.

easy to hide and it was not long before the State realized it had a potential problem on its hands.

As cellular subscriptions rose, more and more citizens used their phones to watch foreign media. From the State's point of view, this had to stop, but permanently shutting down the cellular network was also not a good option.

Instead, the authorities worked to modify the Android operating system used on phones to lock down devices and make them much less useful for illicit media consumption.

Today, consumers have a choice among a handful of brands of smartphones and several models under each brand. While State media claims the phones are made in North Korea, they are not. All smartphones and tablets are produced overseas, mostly in China, by electronics makers that then attach a North Korean brand name on the device.

For example, several recent phones in the popular “Pyongyang” series of smartphone were made by Shenzhen Chenyee Technology. The company has since gone out of business, but was linked to Gionee, a major brand-name phone maker.<sup>90</sup>

The phones are based on standard models that the Chinese manufacturer sells to other phone brands around the world. The big difference between the models in use by North Koreans and those in use by users in other countries is the software.

Over the past few years, North Korea has steadily introduced its own security enhancements and restrictions to Android that leave phone users with much fewer functions than those in the rest of the world.

## User Surveillance with Red Flag and Trace Viewer

Running in the background of every Android tablet and smartphone in North Korea is a program called “Red Flag.” The software logs every page a user visits with the web browser and takes screenshots at random intervals during use of a tablet or phone.

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<sup>90</sup> Martyn Williams, “The origins of the Pyongyang 2423 smartphone,” *North Korea Tech*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.northkoreatech.org/2019/02/05/the-origins-of-the-pyongyang-2423-smartphone/>.

North Korean authorities have also included an app called “Trace Viewer” that allows users to see this database of collected screenshots, but does not allow them to be deleted.<sup>91, 92, 93</sup>

The system is sinister in its simplicity. It reminds users that everything they do on the device can be recorded and later viewed by officials, even if it does not take place online. As such, it insidiously forces North Koreans to self-censor in fear of a device check that might never happen.

## File Watermarking

North Korean engineers have added a file watermarking system to both the Red Star operating system for PCs and to their own version of Android smartphones. Each time a media file is opened on a device, a string of data based on either the hard-disk serial number or phone identification number is appended to the file.

The watermarking is added to images, videos, and document files—anything that could carry illicit information.<sup>94</sup>

This can be used to determine if a file has been opened on a particular machine or phone and, in the case of files that are passed from user to user, the string of devices used to access them.

“North Korean smartphones and other devices leave a tag on USBs so they can trace which computers or mobile devices have viewed them. People in North Korea prefer to watch videos using foreign devices.”  
*(Escapee 26)*

This means that given a single file, the watermarking could be used to determine the complete distribution path for the file, right back to the first person to open it on a North Korean device. Given enough files, a complex distribution map could be created that reveals key points in the distribution network.

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<sup>91</sup> Florian Grunow at Chaos Computer Club Congress, “Lifting the Fog on DPRK’s Latest Tablet PC,” December 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAtWwadP6CY>.

<sup>92</sup> Florian Grunow and Niklaus Schiess, “Exploring North Korea’s Cellphone Surveillance Technology,” [https://www.ernw.de/download/nospy6\\_exploring\\_north\\_koreas\\_surveillance\\_technology.pdf](https://www.ernw.de/download/nospy6_exploring_north_koreas_surveillance_technology.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> Martyn Williams, “All That Glitters Is Not Gold: A Closer Look at North Korea’s Ullim Tablet,” *38 North*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/03/mwilliams030317/>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 88.

Original	00006fa1	AD	11	02	77	6A	2E	8F	D5	E5	F5	CF	94	FF	00	3D	CB	EB
	00006fb2	9F	29	FE	7B	97	D7	3E	53	FC	F7	2F	AE	7F	A1	DD	FE	7B
	00006fc3	FD	5E	OC	FF	D9												
First user	00006fa1	AD	11	02	77	6A	2E	8F	D5	E5	F5	CF	94	FF	00	3D	CB	EB
	00006fb2	9F	29	FE	7B	97	D7	3E	53	FC	F7	2F	AE	7F	A1	DD	FE	7B
	00006fc3	FD	5E	OC	FF	D9	E3	E0	D9	04	55	9D	35	F9	9B	3B	FD	DA
	00006fd4	6B	D6	B6	A9	5A	13	A0	E6	29	4B	75	B1	18	00	00	00	45
	00006fe5	4F	46															
Second user	00006fa1	AD	11	02	77	6A	2E	8F	D5	E5	F5	CF	94	FF	00	3D	CB	EB
	00006fb2	9F	29	FE	7B	97	D7	3E	53	FC	F7	2F	AE	7F	A1	DD	FE	7B
	00006fc3	FD	5E	OC	FF	D9	E3	E0	D9	04	55	9D	35	F9	9B	3B	FD	DA
	00006fd4	6B	D6	B6	A9	5A	13	A0	E6	29	4B	75	B1	79	08	DF	D0	E0
	00006fe5	92	B2	D1	28	24	7E	20	31	59	75	B2	5A	13	A0	E6	29	4B
	00006ff6	75	B1	30	00	00	00	45	4F	46								

This capability is troubling, although, there is currently no evidence that the regime has a comprehensive national database of hard-disk drive serial numbers. However, the Koryolink cellular operator records the International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number of all phones it issues so mobile users are potentially at a higher risk.

However, the watermarking system is not a primary method of control on State-issued devices. A digital certificate system restricts playback of content files, which means that it is difficult to use such smartphones and tablets for viewing illicit media. It is also difficult to directly share content between devices.

## Digital Signatures

North Korea's digital signature system is effective and simple. It locks down a smartphone or tablet to the point that it becomes little more than a consumption device for State propaganda and personal memories.

Its introduction began in 2012, when the State mandated that new software be downloaded on all smartphones in the country. The change added new controls that took away the ability to watch anything but State-sanctioned video files.

"The reception bar on the phone used to be blue, but then the government changed this to red. With the red reception bar, smartphones could not read any memory cards or access the files on them. It took around three years to implement this, but all smartphones were changed by the end of 2014. Older smartphones stopped working and could not receive calls or make calls." (Escapee 27)

The color switch on the signal strength meter shows a certain level of sophistication by the authorities. By making that simple change,

it would be immediately obvious to anyone checking phones on the street whether the phone had been updated or not.

Understandably, once the results of the software update spread among users, no one was enthusiastic about updating their phones.

*"People didn't follow the instructions, but they had lots of lectures to persuade people to download the new software."*  
(Escapee 27)

When a file is opened on a device with the updated operating system, the app opening it checks to see if it has been digitally signed by one of two digital signatures: 1) NATISIGN is a national signature derived from the North Korean government's digital certificate and 2) SELFSIGN comes from the device's own digital certificate, which is unique.<sup>95</sup>

Without one of these two signatures, files cannot be opened.

Apps that use the digital signature system include the file browser, image gallery, music player, Android installer, PDF viewer, audio recorder, and text editor.

In practice, this means that if a file was not created by the device—for example, an audio file, photo, or video—or it did not come from the State, it cannot be opened on the phone. It instantly renders North Korean devices useless in terms of viewing or listening to "illicit" media.

The State signature is an industry standard Rivest–Shamir–Adleman (RSA) public-key cryptosystem of 2,048 bits in length. The length corresponds to how difficult it is to hack and 2,048 bits is the

<sup>95</sup> Florian Grunow at Chaos Computer Club Congress, "Lifting the Fog on DPRK's Latest Tablet PC," December 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAtWwadP6CY>.

current standard recommended by the U.S. National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST) for RSA keys that will remain secure until at least the year 2030.<sup>96</sup>

The self-signed files—those created with the device itself—incorporate the device's IMEI and International Mobile Subscriber Identity (IMSI) into the signature file, which adds another level of tracking. However, this does not matter too much because the file cannot be played on another device. For example, if a parent took a picture of their child with a smartphone, it could not be viewed on another smartphone.

This digital certificate system encompasses almost all files that can be opened:

- Audio and video formats: .3g2, .3gp, .aac, .ac3, .amr, .ape, .ASF, .AVC, .avi, .awb, .cda, .dat, .divx, .dts, .flac, .flv, .ifo, .m4a, .m4b, .m4p, .m4r, .m4v, .mid, .midi, .mka, .mkv, .mmf, .mov, .mp2, .mp2v, .mp3, .mp4, .mpa, .mpc, .mpeg, .mpeg4, .mpg, .oifr, .ogg, .ogm, .ra, .ram, .rm, .rmvb, .smf, .swf, .tp, .ts, .tta, .vob, .wav, .wma, .wmv, .wv, .3gpp, .cwdx, .csdx, .cpdx
- Image formats: .bmp, .gif, .jpeg, .jpg, .pcx, .png, .tga, .tif, .tiff, .jps
- Text-based formats: .xlsx, .xml, .doc, .docx, .htm, .html, .pdf, .ppt, .pptx, .rtf, .txt, .xls, .odt, .ods, .odp
- Android files: .apk

As can be seen, this includes all the most popular image, video and audio formats used and some arcane and niche ones that are rarely found. It also includes all Microsoft Office, Open Office, and Adobe PDF formats and Android application files themselves.

Additionally, by applying the same watermarking system to Android apps, it means apps cannot be freely installed on smartphones and tablets unless they have the approval of the State.

## File Integrity Checks

The security software preloaded onto North Korean phones and computers would not be so much of a hurdle if it could easily be replaced, but it cannot.

Beginning with Red Star OS in 2013, engineers added a program that checks core files of the operating system against a preinstalled database. They look to see if any of the files have been changed or replaced and, depending on the file, will either warn the user or immediately reboot the device.

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<sup>96</sup> National Institute for Standards and Technology, "SP 800-57 Part I Rev. 4 Recommendation for Key Management," January 2016, <https://csrc.nist.gov/publications/detail/sp/800-57-part-i/rev-4/final>.

If the latter happens, the machine can end up stuck in a loop of constant reboots and be useless to the user. This result would have been obvious to programmers, so it was a conscious decision to render a PC useless rather than allow it to run with modified files.<sup>97</sup>

On smartphones, similar file integrity checks are called out by the "Red Flag" software, which was mentioned earlier, that is used to screenshot user activities.<sup>98</sup>

## WiFi

The first cell phones allowed into North Korea from 2008 included the ability to use WiFi. At first, it appeared that the authorities saw no threat from the technology, although that changed.

One of the reasons seems to be because of Internet hotspots used by embassies in central Pyongyang. At least one embassy set up an open access point so that anyone nearby would be able to connect and access the Internet. The first hotspots appeared in August 2013 and citizens were anxious to move close to the district of the embassy in order to connect to the WiFi signals, according to one report.<sup>99</sup>

Soon after the report was published, North Korea's State Radio Regulatory Department sent a letter to diplomatic missions and international organizations in Pyongyang informing them that WiFi was prohibited without State permission.

The letter all but confirmed the story when it said that WiFi signals "installed and being used without license, produce some effect upon our surroundings." It went on to instruct users to consult with the State if they wanted to use a WiFi network or risk a fine.<sup>100</sup>

Having removed the immediate problem of open WiFi networks, the authorities' next step was a little more ambitious. They began removing WiFi from phones themselves. Several subsequent generations of North Korean smartphones had the WiFi feature disabled in the firmware so it was impossible to switch on.

This lasted for several years until the regime apparently concluded that it could reintroduce WiFi on its own terms.

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<sup>97</sup> Florian Grunow at Chaos Computer Club Congress, "Lifting the Fog on Red Star OS," December 27, 2015, [https://media.ccc.de/v/32c3-7174-lifting\\_the\\_fog\\_on\\_red\\_star\\_os/related](https://media.ccc.de/v/32c3-7174-lifting_the_fog_on_red_star_os/related).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> North Korea Intellectual Solidarity, "평양시내 대사관주변의 집값 천정부지로 뛰어 올라," August 6, 2014, <http://www.nkis.kr/board.php?board=nkisb201&command=body&no=536>.

<sup>100</sup> Leo Byrne, "North Korea bans WiFi networks for foreigners," NK News, September 8, 2014, <https://www.nknews.org/2014/09/north-korea-bans-wifi-networks-for-foreigners/>.

## Martyn Williams

In September 2017, North Korea's first public WiFi network went into operation in central Pyongyang. Called the Mirae Network, it is available on Mirae Scientists Street and in Kim Chaek University areas, and requires an app that is preinstalled on some phones and tablets.<sup>101</sup>



Figure 12: A Mirae WiFi network antenna in Pyongyang, shown on KCTV.



Figure 13: A Mirae network SIM card shown being inserted into a phone during a KCTV news report on October 21, 2018. (Photo: KCTV)

If true, it would be a highly unusual use of SIM technology, which is typically used with cellular networks, and might point to a higher-security access system. A SIM card would prevent account sharing in a way possible with a username and password.

101 “Wi-Fi로 전민학습환경을 개선/ 무선망관형컴퓨터가 호평,” *Choson Sinbo*, August 8, 2018, <http://chosonsinbo.com/2018/08/il-1814/>.

102 Korean Central Television, 8 p.m. news report, KCTV, October 21, 2018.

# SECTION 8: SOCIAL ENGINEERING AS A RESPONSE

The introduction of new technology can have a profound effect on people, causing them to alter the habits of a lifetime over a short period of time for better or for worse.

Among a handful of technologies introduced to North Korea over the last few years, two are worth watching with respect to their effects on consumption of foreign information.

## Smartphone Games

At first, it might seem unlikely that North Koreans have access to a wide range of smartphone games. After all, North Korea's State media is not known for being light-hearted, but over the last few years, the number of games officially available has grown tremendously.

A modern North Korean smartphone, such as the Daeyang 832I, includes a catalog of 125 gaming apps with titles, such as "Special Operations Group," "Future Cities," and "Volleyball 2016." A handful are free, but most require payment.

The apps are another way that the regime is trying to block the flood of foreign content, according to one escapee.

*"The government is developing lots of mobile games so that people play those instead of watching overseas content."*  
(Escapee 36)

In many countries, mobile gaming has become a major activity on smartphones and it appears that the North Korean State has seized this idea. The time spent playing a game will take away from the overall free time that somebody has and that includes time that might otherwise be spent watching a foreign drama or movie.

Before smartphones, computer games already played a role in limiting the consumption of foreign content. According to one escapee, the sole laptop in the house used to watch foreign content was sometimes tied up with computer games.

*"I lived with my nephew and he loved to play computer games on the laptop. We also used the laptop to watch movies and copy content between SD cards and USB drives."*  
(Escapee 37)

The use of smartphone games to steer people away from foreign content is perhaps more subtle than expanding State television content. While numerous escapees in their 20s told of the

boredom of watching State television, many were interested in computer games.

## Internet Protocol Television Services

IPTV services stream live video channels and on-demand programming across the national intranet and have been a research focus of North Korean information technology (IT) groups since at least 2012.<sup>103</sup>

Two systems have been named in State media: 1) "Nuri" (누리) developed by the Institute of Advanced Telecommunication Research at Kim Il-sung University and 2) "Manbang" (만방) developed by the Manbang Information and Technology Supply Center.<sup>104, 105</sup>

Of these, *Manbang* appears to be the main service as it gets regularly mentioned in preference to *Nuri*. The set-top box for the service is sourced from Aisat, a Chinese electronics maker, but rebranded as a domestically-produced device.

*Manbang*, or *ManTV* (만TV) as it is often referenced, is accessed through a set-top box connected to the national intranet through a digital subscriber line (DSL) data connection over the telephone network.



Figure 14: The *Manbang* set-top box. (Author's photograph)

103 "Many Units Get Access to IT," KCNA, November 13, 2012, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451900483-298067161/many-units-get-access-to-it/>.

104 "효률적인 IPTV봉사체계 『누리』 개발," Rodong Sinmun, July 30, 2018, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1532908869-952521312/%ED%9A%A8%EB%A5%A0%EC%A0%81%EC%9D%B8-iptv%EB%B4%89%EC%82%A C%EC%B2%B4%EA%B3%84-%E3%80%8A%EB%88%84%EB%A6%AC%E3 %80%8B-%EA%B0%9C%EB%B0%9C/>.

105 Korean Central Television, 8 p.m. News, August 16, 2016.

## Martyn Williams

Using *Manbang*, viewers can access a number of live television channels and hundreds of on-demand programs drawn from the output of State television.

The channels include KCTV, which is available over-the-air across the country. Also included are several channels that had been available only in Pyongyang, including *Ryongnamsan TV* (룡남산텔레비죤), *Mansudae TV* (만수대텔레비죤), and *Sports TV* (체육 텔레비죤).

The additional channels give viewers outside of Pyongyang a choice in programming for the first time and during the daytime, when State television is not on the air, the on-demand video library provides programming choices. KCTV signs on the air at 3:00 p.m. on most days, which means many homes have nothing to watch until that time, and even after that, it is only one channel of State propaganda. This lack of choices inevitably leads to boredom and could be the push that some need to seek out foreign content.

*"In North Korea, the TV dramas don't come on until the afternoon or the evening, so I had nothing to watch during the daytime. That's why I chose to watch Chinese channels. I noticed that South Korean dramas are much more interesting compared to the North Korean ones. I was especially curious about South Korean dramas because my family was already in South Korea."*

(Escapee 31)

The IPTV services provide more choices, not all of it being dry propaganda. The sports channel carries highlights from domestic and international sporting events, and *Ryongnamsan TV* carries a small selection of foreign movies. In the video-on-demand section of *Manbang*, users can rewatch any KCTV program from at least the past week, access libraries of kids shows or movies, and, of course, ideological education.



Figure 15: The *Manbang* TV interface with translations by Dabin Song, HRNK Research Intern.

IPTV is about expanding access to the State television ecosystem to lock more people into the programming.

On January 20, 2019, KCTV reported on *Manbang TV* being used at the "Rangrim Forest Management Office" (랑림림산사업소) on the country's east coast. The service was being used to deliver "ideological refinement and science and technology lessons."<sup>106</sup>

The forestry office has nine units spread over tens of kilometers and said that the science and technology lessons available on demand via *Manbang TV* were being used at all of them. Another worker made the point that State television programs and Kim Jong-un's speeches and field guidance reports are also available at any time.

It is possible that in the future, the system could be expanded to become the primary way that television programming is delivered to North Koreans. If this happens, the regime would be free to give up over-the-air broadcasts. That would make monitoring North Korean television from outside the country more difficult and could mean that television antennas would be removed from houses and television tuners permanently disabled in television sets. Such a move would drastically cut back on the amount of live foreign television consumption in North Korea.

This step already appears to have been taken at some North Korean diplomatic missions overseas. A 2017 report said that the State had started installing *Manbang TV* set-top boxes at overseas missions and then banned the use of local television services to cut diplomats' exposure to foreign culture.<sup>107</sup>

106 Korean Central Television, 8 p.m. News, January 20, 2019.

107 Yi Yong-chong, "No South Korean TV – North Broadcast-only Set Top Boxes at Overseas Missions," *JoongAng Ilbo*, December 13, 2017.

## SECTION 9: NORTH KOREA'S EXTERNAL MEDIA

North Korea's messaging to the outside world is stuck in time. It takes place mainly on shortwave radio and through State-sponsored magazines, which were cutting edge mediums in the 1970s, but are woefully behind in the 21st century. While other nations, such as China, South Korea, Germany, Iran, and France, have reduced or closed shortwave radio in favor of 24-hour international television channels, North Korea has not innovated at all.

In the last decade, North Korea has opened a handful of websites on the global Internet, but they are built around translations of domestic content into English and a handful of other languages. It is incredibly dry content that is not engaging or convincing to a foreign audience in a media-saturated world.

The country appears to have no foreign propaganda strategy whatsoever when it comes to new, innovative media messaging.

Why not?

The answer is likely the same reason there has been so little innovation in domestic media output: an instruction to change has never come down from the top. In North Korea's top-down society, where all media is controlled by the long arm of the PAD, there are not any points to be gained from innovating and trying new things. In fact, workers have everything to lose if they try or even suggest something new.

*"I think it's because of the North Korean government structure itself. The North Korean government is built on the premise of deification of the Kim family. It's almost impossible for those people working for media organizations to produce anything that deviates from this deification. If you make something different from this, then you get executed. So, how can you do this?"*

(Jung Gwang-il, Founder and President, No Chain for North Korea)

And because there is no exception to the reverence to which Kim Jong-un is held, it is inconceivable that anyone would question whether reports about his guidance visits and speeches are the best "face" to show to the world. The result is that Voice of Korea, magazines, and the websites often carry the exact same reports about him, illustrated with the same images as those that are carried in domestic media.

## Voice of Korea

Voice of Korea is North Korea's shortwave radio broadcaster and is the country's biggest producer of daily propaganda material aimed at overseas audiences. Previously called *Radio Pyongyang*, it began in 1947 with Chinese-language broadcasts and soon followed with Japanese. Today, it broadcasts 49 hours of programming per day in those two languages as well as English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic.

Each 50-minute program includes a news bulletin, propaganda songs, an anecdotal story about the Kim family, and a couple of other small features.

Listening to the radio station in 2019, it is striking how little has changed. The type of news stories, the music played, and the features covered today are surprisingly similar to those detailed in the BBC monitoring reports from the late 1950s.

Recently, Voice of Korea has modernized by launching a website, although there is no livestreaming. The programming and frequency guides are not even carried and while audio clips from programs are available, the entire 50-minute daily broadcast is not uploaded.<sup>108</sup>

## Magazines

North Korea produces several monthly magazines that promote the country. The Foreign Language Publishing House in Pyongyang puts out the 52-page monthly *Korea Today*, the 44-page pictorial monthly *DPR Korea*, and the 36-page quarterly *Foreign Trade* in English and other languages.

All three magazines promote the country and *Foreign Trade* even includes advertisements for North Korean trading companies, but none of them depart from domestic media style. There is no attempt made to hide ideological content with softer features. This does little to change any reader's perception of North Korea.

The magazines are all available in PDF format from the Naenara website.<sup>109</sup>

## Korean Central Television

While not aimed at viewers outside of North Korea, Korean Central Television is probably the media outlet most familiar to people around the world. KCTV can be directly received in most areas of the globe

<sup>108</sup> Voice of Korea, <http://www.vok.rep.kp>.

<sup>109</sup> Naenara website, <http://www.naenara.com.kp>.

## Martyn Williams

with a large 3-meter satellite dish, although most will know it from use of its pictures on local and international news channels.<sup>110</sup> KCTV images are distributed through arrangements with Reuters TV and APTN, both based in London.

The spectacle of Pyongyang's military parades and its news bulletins on missile and nuclear tests mean North Korean news reader Ri Chun-hee is instantly recognizable to millions of people worldwide.

This type of exposure is impossible to buy for most countries, but North Korea does not appear to exploit it. The satellite feed available globally is exactly the same as the domestic feed. There are no special programs or other accommodations for a foreign audience and for hours a day, it carries nothing but a test signal.

In the last couple of years, North Korea does appear to have become more aware of the international audience for the channel. Occasionally, the broadcaster will blur out certain areas of an image to prevent things from being seen.

However, KCTV remains largely a domestic propaganda tool. North Korea's prime tools of international influence are radio and magazines.

## Social Media

North Korea has a minor presence on social media networks, but this is the only area where its external outreach appears to be expanding. Most social media accounts that carry North Korean content can be split into two types: 1) channels operated by the semi-official Uriminzokkiri site based in China and 2) those operated by North Korea fans and enthusiasts.

Like other mediums, they rely on material from State media and so rarely show a different side of the country. Most of the content from Uriminzokkiri is in Korean while the latter group of enthusiasts mostly post in English, Russian, and Spanish. There is little reason to follow them as none does a particularly convincing job at changing any existing narrative on North Korea.

After the U.S. government imposed sanctions on North Korea, many social networks closed the accounts of sites operating out of Pyongyang. Those of supporters overseas have not been closed.

An exception is the @coldnoodlefan Twitter account. The name is presumably a reference to Pyongyang *naengmyeon* (냉면) cold noodles, one of North Korea's most famous dishes. It describes itself as "Anti-war, peace advocate and unbiased news on the DPRK through exclusive video and photos."

The account is notable for its coverage of softer North Korean news items, such as products on sale in supermarkets, photos of ordinary people enjoying themselves, and videos from places around Pyongyang. Most of the videos appear to have been filmed with a smartphone and include subjects and stories not seen elsewhere in State media. The account does, at times, use more professional images and Kim Jong-un's activities are chronicled, but no other major news is mentioned.

The account uses emojis in some of its tweets and appears to be making an effort to make North Korea appear more approachable or to humanize North Koreans. On several occasions, the account has even pushed back on comments.

The operator of the account is anonymous. In comments, the operator mentions somewhat regular access to Pyongyang and sometimes claims that images were received from friends, but it is impossible to verify if this is correct. One website, NK News, closely followed the account and discovered that it occasionally includes unpublished images in tweets only for them to later appear on the Sogwang.com website—this is a North Korean site that carries feature stories about the country. So, it is possible that it is a State-run Twitter account or at least has a traceable link to Sogwang.<sup>111</sup>

## Websites

North Korea has an ever-growing number of websites that promote the country and Kim Jong-un. As of late November 2019, 37 different sites were available from Internet servers in Pyongyang itself. They range from the State news agency and KWP daily newspaper to a handful of State ministries and promotional efforts, but like other efforts, there is no attempt to hide the propaganda nature of the content.

However, a number of other sites are run from servers outside North Korea and offer a slightly different look at the country.

The largest is Uriminzokkiri, which is based in Shenyang, China. It carries a mix of State propaganda and its own articles and videos, and is mainly targeted at Korean speakers in China, South Korea, and Japan. The site is unique in that it has links to Pyongyang yet programs its own articles and videos.

Additional sites, which can usually be identified by their ".com" domain names rather than ".kp" names, include Sogwang and Arirang Meari. They are run from servers in Russia and China respectively and focus on North Korean life and social stories rather than politics and present a softer image of the country. However, unlike Uriminzokkiri, they do not carry self-produced commentaries.

<sup>110</sup> Korean Central Television is relayed by the Thaicom 5 satellite for Asia, Africa, and Europe (3,696 MHz, Horizontal, SR 4167, FEC 3/5, DVB-S2), and the Intelsat 21 satellite for Western Europe and the Americas (3,840 MHz, Vertical, SR 27690, FEC 7/8, DVB-S).

<sup>111</sup> Colin Zwirko, "Coldnoodlefan: a North Korea-linked foray into sockpuppet Twitter accounts?", NK News, March 22, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/03/coldnoodlefan-a-north-korea-linked-foray-into-sockpuppet-twitter-accounts/>.

# Foreign Eyes on Domestic Media

In the last couple of years, North Korea appears to have become more aware that its domestic media output is also being consumed by external audiences and that is not always a good thing. Video images in KCTV reports can sometimes give away unintended information about the country.

For example, May 2019 TV and magazine coverage of the opening of the Taesong Department Store revealed products from more than a dozen international luxury brands on sale including Tissot, Rolex, and Siemens. Such goods are currently prohibited from being sold to North Korea under international sanctions.<sup>112</sup>

In response, the use of a blur or mosaic over certain areas of images is becoming more common.

Sometimes, the reason is clear. When Kim Jong-un inspected a new submarine in June 2019, the area of the missile launch tubes was obscured in State media photographs, and July 2019 coverage of a new mobile missile launcher completely obscured the launcher under a mosaic.



Figure 16: KCTV shows use of a mosaic to disguise parts of an image.



Figure 17: KCTV show use of a mosaic to disguise parts of an image.

Sometimes the reason is not so clear. In some coverage, slogans in the background of interview subjects are blurred out to prevent the audience from reading them.

This recent attention to external consumption of domestic media is occurring alongside a general push to stop information from leaking out of North Korea. Just as foreign content flows in, information is increasingly leaving the borders and causing the State trouble.

North Korean media is closely watched by specialists and media outlets, such as NK News, and the images can point to sanctions violations, unannounced internal trouble, or simply domestic developments that the State would rather not have the world know about.

This is a developing, yet notable change because it is a problem that North Korea has not had to worry about until recently.

[nknews.org/2019/03/coldnoodlefan-a-north-korea-linked-foray-into-sockpuppet-twitter-accounts/](https://nknews.org/2019/03/coldnoodlefan-a-north-korea-linked-foray-into-sockpuppet-twitter-accounts/).

<sup>112</sup> Oliver Hotham, "Photos reveal extent of foreign luxury goods available in new Pyongyang dept. store," NK News, May 2, 2019, <https://www.nknews.org/2019/05/photos-reveal-extent-of-foreign-luxury-goods-available-in-new-pyongyang-dept-store/>.

## SECTION 10: CONCLUSION

When talking to escapees and reading their testimonies, it is easy to conclude that State attitudes towards foreign content in North Korea are changing towards greater tolerance. Many escapees talk about its pervasiveness and speak of watching it with family, friends, and even officials who are meant to be controlling its spread. Applicable legal sentences have also been reduced and the death penalty is reportedly only rarely handed out for what has become a more common offense.

However, to assume things are getting better would be a mistake. While attitudes towards foreign content may be changing at the local level, especially in provinces far from Pyongyang, the State is far from giving up control over what North Koreans watch and listen to.

The North Korean system remains firmly in control of people's lives and has not shown any signs of major instability, although the regime does appear to understand that it risks losing the propaganda battle. In March 2019, Kim Jong-un called on KWP propaganda officials to work harder on their indoctrination efforts:

*"Under the present drastically changing situation, the grand goal of struggle that we want to achieve demands us, as we always have, put more sincere and greater effort into inspiring the ideological and spiritual strength of the popular masses, who are the masters of the revolution and construction."<sup>113</sup>*

The State still has the benefit of years of brainwashing on its side and a powerful security apparatus to keep people in line. These should not be underestimated. Citizens might not be executed as commonly as before for watching foreign content, but they are still at risk of losing everything should they be caught.

This is especially true for the lowest levels of society. The rise in bribery has created an ever-increasing income gap, where consumption of foreign content shifts towards the rich and well connected, while the poor avoid it because they cannot pay the bribes.

The Criminal Code revisions represent a slight softening of attitude towards the consumption of foreign media but a refocusing of efforts to crack down on distributors. If successful, this could throw established supply chains into chaos and lead to fewer distribution routes for foreign content and a higher cost.

While digital technology has created new pathways for foreign content, the rise of smart, networked appliances could work against information freedom and eventually lead to the creation of an even more oppressive Orwellian society.

Although media reporting in many countries has highlighted the uncomfortable amount of data collected by companies, such as Facebook, Google, and Uber, North Koreans have not seen this and so are a soft target for digital surveillance. The regime's total control over smartphone software means it would be relatively simple to include tracking and surveillance software should it wish to do so.

There are no signs that it has taken this step yet, but it could be a serious threat to the population. Aside from the most obvious risks, such as user tracking through GPS and the surveillance of text messages, there are frightening possibilities, including use of the microphone to surveil nearby conversations or to detect what content is being watched.

The North Korean State has proven over time to be adept at countering the flow of information into the country and for this reason, the future remains bleak. While each new technology or innovation represents a new chance to provide North Koreans with greater access to information, continuing development and innovation will be essential to stay a step ahead of the State.

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<sup>113</sup> "Respected and Beloved Leader Kim Jong Un Sent Letter Entitled, 'Let Us Double the Propelling Energy of the Revolution with Novel Propaganda and Agitation,'" *Rodong Sinmun*, March 9, 2019.

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## Martyn Williams

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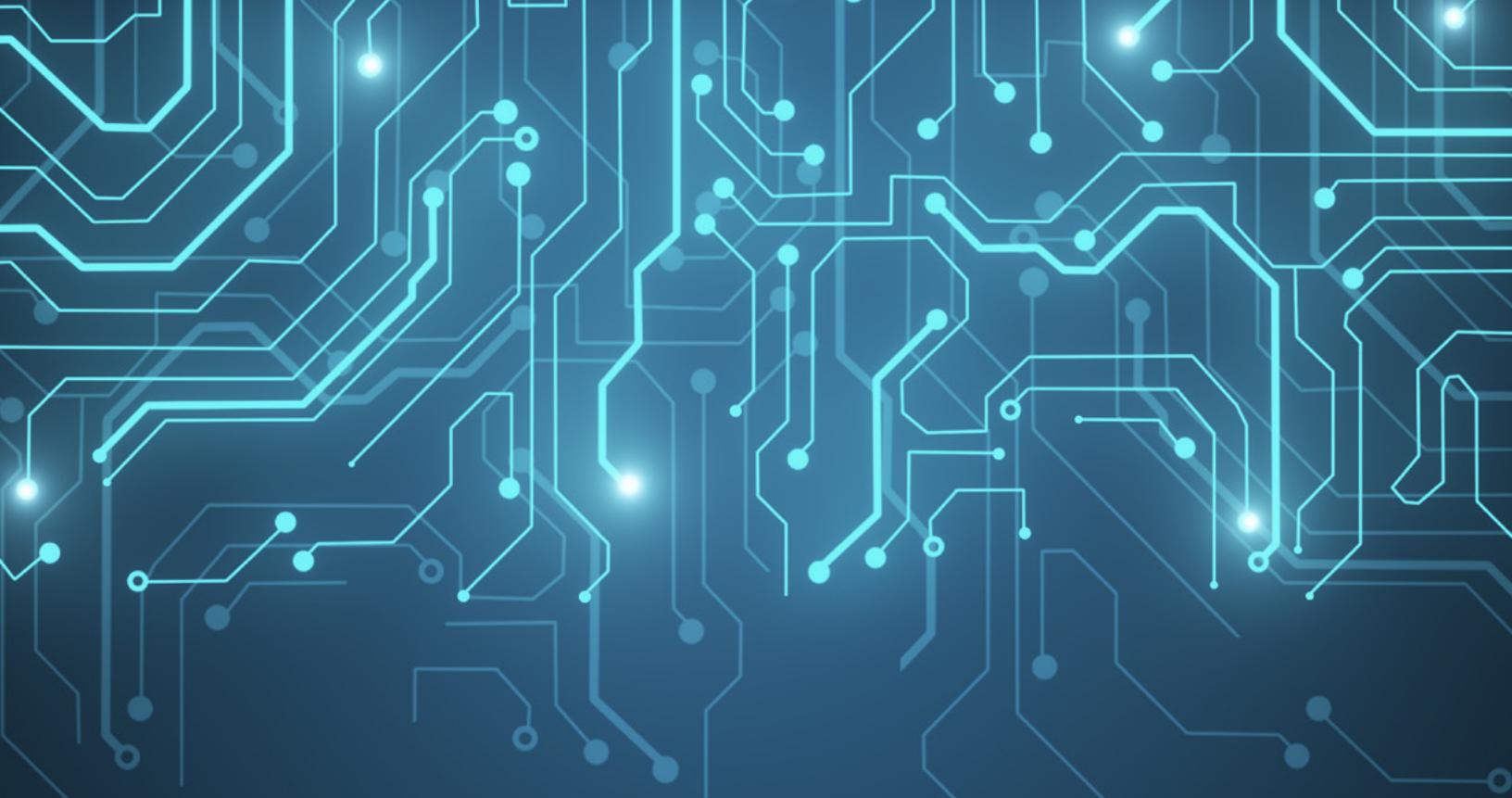
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