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North Korea is Winning the Information War

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Executive Summary

Jonathan Corrado, Chelsie Alexandre, and Alexander Tufto

The outside world has been presented with two contradictory images of North Korea's younger generation. In the outside media, youth are portrayed as rebellious and radical, ignoring the Kim regime's increasingly harsh crackdowns on foreign media and trends, and instead toting the latest South Korean fashion trends and adopting South Korean lingo. Meanwhile, state propaganda pushes the narrative that North Korean youth are extremely devoted to Kim Jong Un and the regime. Both conceptions of North Korea's younger generation fail to acknowledge a more complex reality.

Kim Jong Un understands the importance of winning over the younger generation to ensure his regime's survival. Since coming into power, Kim has increased the severity of punishments for importing, distributing, and consuming foreign media. This strangled information environment amplifies the efficacy of a youth loyalty campaign designed to bear hug the younger generation. As a consequence, when compared with older cohorts, North Korean youth have a more favorable view of the regime, *juche* ideology, and Kim Jong Un himself. In short, the campaign is working.

A reinvigorated foreign media distribution strategy is needed to break the impasse and win the battle over hearts and minds. Despite the dangers, North Koreans remain highly interested in foreign media. Research shows that those who consume tend to feel more fondly about South Korea and view the North Korean regime critically. Foreign media provides a powerful basis to cross check regime propaganda and can even lay the foundation for a shared understanding of concepts like human rights and civil society. A reinvigorated strategy should focus on content curation and innovative dissemination methods to maximize utility and minimize blowback for end users in North Korea.

Two Versions of North Korea's Youth

The outside world is presented with two very different characterizations of North Korea's youth. On the one hand, North Korean state media portrays the country's teenagers and twenty-somethings as loyal proponents of the leader Kim Jong Un regime's "revolutionary" cause, but, on the other hand, unofficial accounts hint that these youngsters are increasingly questioning the loyal orientation that typified prior generations. Getting to the truth of the matter is more than an academic discussion: the ideological orientation of the youth speaks to the long term viability of the regime and prospects for rapprochement with the international community and a soft landing: change from within that doesn't precipitate bloodshed. Kim Jong Un's ruling strategy necessitates that he inculcates the youth to believe the outside world is a hostile place: This siege mentality legitimizes his totalitarian control. The battle for young people's hearts and minds—pitting love for the Marshal against South Korean K-Pop—is underway, and there are reasons to think that the regime has taken a comfortable lead.

Let's start by observing the two different depictions of North Korean young people. In the regime's version, the youth are doting and dutiful, aspiring above all else to earn the affection and approval of Marshall Kim Jong Un. North Korea's government and state media would have the world believe that its young people are unquestionably committed to the ideals of socialism, *juche* ideology, and the Kim dynasty. A recent *Rodong Sinmun* article showcased a glossy propaganda scene rife with symbolism: children at Mangyongdae Schoolchildren's Palace "burst into cheers full of great excitement" when Kim Jong Un arrived.¹ Children performed songs and danced "full of excitement and joy" for his enjoyment. This performance reportedly reflects the determination of the children to become "young revolutionaries and patriots... guaranteeing that the *Juche* revolution is full of vitality." Kim Jong Un fulfilled his role as the "benevolent father" while the

"bright laughing of children" served as a symbol of "the mightiness of Korean-style socialism."

But other sources reveal that not all children are as devoted as the regime wants us to believe. North Korean children first encountered a song called "Three Bears," when they (illegally) watched a popular South Korean drama called "Full House." Youngsters adapted the lyrics of the song to insult the Kim regime, singing: "Grandpa bear [Kim Il Sung] is fat, papa bear [Kim Jong Il] is also fat, and baby bear [Kim Jong Un] is foolish."² In response, representatives from the Socialist Youth League were dispatched to catch and punish students found singing the song or in possession of foreign media. This was in 2015. But old trends die hard. In 2022, Youth League monitors were again tasked with busting students for singing mocking, satirical versions of revolutionary North Korean songs and embracing South Korean music.³

Indeed, since a famine shattered the social contract between state and society in the mid-1990s, millennials have been labeled by outside analysts the *jangmadang* (market) generation, characterized by their ambivalence to state ideology and proclivity for adopting South Korean fashion, slang, and even dating culture.⁴ This version of freewheeling youngsters conflicts with the version described by Kim Jong Un and broadcast in state media. So which is the truth? A careful analysis suggests that these conflicting characterizations represent extreme ends of the spectrum and both fail to reflect the complex reality.

North Korea recently intensified punishments for people who use South Korean language, which suggests that the regime is straining to maintain an ideological grip over the population. A new law is especially telling. The anti-reactionary thought law, enacted in 2020 and amended in 2022, "describes South Korean movies, dramas, news and other outside content [as] reactionary thought and culture."⁵ Those caught with the banned content are

¹ *Rodong Sinmun* (En), "Respected Fatherly Marshal Kim Jong Un Watches New Year Performance Given by Schoolchildren," Feb. 1, 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1704163834-170955023/respected-fatherly-marshal-kim-jong-un-watches-new-year-performance-given-by-schoolchildren/>.

² *Daily NK*, "SK children's song under fire above border," Nov. 17, 2015, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sk-childrens-song-under-fire-above/>.

³ Chae Hwan Kim, "N. Korea orders campaign against young people singing song with altered lyrics, S. Korean songs," *Daily NK*, Sept. 7, 2022, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-orders-campaign-against-young-people-singing-songs-altered-lyrics-south-korean-songs/>.

⁴ Chae Un Lee, "North Korean smugglers eye latest South Korean fashion trends," *Daily NK*, Jan. 31, 2024, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-smugglers-eye-latest-south-korean-fashion-trends/>; Chae Un Lee, "Young N. Koreans flaunt government laws aimed at stamping out foreign culture," *Daily NK*, Dec. 30, 2023, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/young-n-koreans-flaunt-government-laws-aimed-at-stamping-out-foreign-culture/>.

⁵ Seulkee Jang, "Daily NK acquires full text of the anti-reactionary thought law," *Daily NK*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/daily-nk-acquires-full-text-of-the-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>.

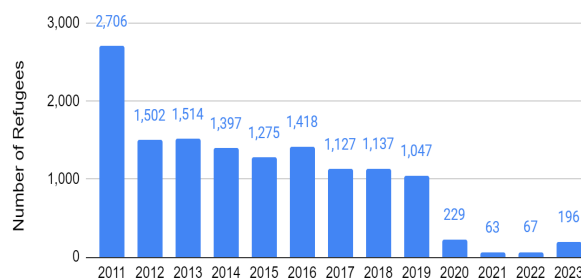
subjected to heightened punishments: six years to life of reform through labor for consuming, and ten years or even execution for importing or distributing. The law also bans the use of South Korean phrases like *oppa* [older brother] and appending *nim* as an honorific to titles when addressing others. These phrases are signifiers of South Korean influence that diminish the more stodgy and rigid North Korean values and conventions. Even cutesy *aegyo* speech has been targeted: The law dictates that “citizens shall not imitate puppet style [South Korean] intonation by raising and lengthening their intonation at the end of a phrase in an obsequious, lilting and nauseating way.” Anyone who has watched South Korean movies or dramas knows what this is referring to.

While the efficacy of past crackdowns has been diluted by bribery and corruption, this current iteration is having a stronger effect: Video footage has emerged of two teenage boys sentenced to 12 years of hard labor in a show trial in front of hundreds of classmates for the crime of consuming South Korean media.⁶ This is part of a larger trend that has its roots at the inception of Kim’s rule. In 2014, Kim Jong Un oversaw the creation of The State Security Department’s Central 109 Inspection Command (called Group 109) in order to crack down on the flow of foreign media and information.⁷ Since then, 85% of respondents said that punishments are tougher now for consuming foreign media than they were under Kim Jong Il, according to a 2018 survey by the US Agency for Global Media.⁸ Two-thirds of North Koreans “personally experienced an inspection by Group 109,” according to a poll by InterMedia of 350 refugees who left the country between 2016 and 2018. North Korea ranked dead last in *The 2023 World Press Freedom Index* by Reporters Without Borders.⁹

The most reliable information on this topic comes from North Korean refugees, but unfortunately, the number able to escape has dramatically declined since the COVID border lockdown. Much information is therefore out of date. Only as the border opens up will we be able to get a stronger

understanding of how conditions have changed in the past few years.

North Korean Refugees Reaching South Korea



Source: South Korean Ministry of Unification

North Korea’s Not-So-Radical Youth

Although the persistence of North Korean interest in foreign media suggests that North Koreans are rejecting the regime’s narratives and ideology wholesale in favor of more entertaining foreign alternatives, analysis of other defector surveys suggests a much more complicated picture. In particular, the younger generation is overall more positive toward the regime, *juche* ideology, and Kim Jong Un compared to older cohorts, according to defector surveys conducted by Seoul National University (SNU).¹⁰ From 2011-2020, a higher proportion of North Korean defectors in their 20s and 30s believed that Kim Jong Un had majority support in the country compared to their elders. Twenty and 30-somethings were also less likely to report hearing criticism about the government and the leader compared to those in their forties, fifties, and sixties. In 2014, the young generation had less pride in *juche* than the older generation. But that dynamic flipped in 2020: over half of the young respondents had “a lot” or “some” pride in *juche*, while the majority of older respondents had “not much” or “none.”

⁶ Sangmi Han, “North Korea: Rare footage shows teens sentenced to hard labour over K-drama,” *BBC*, Jan. 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68015652>.

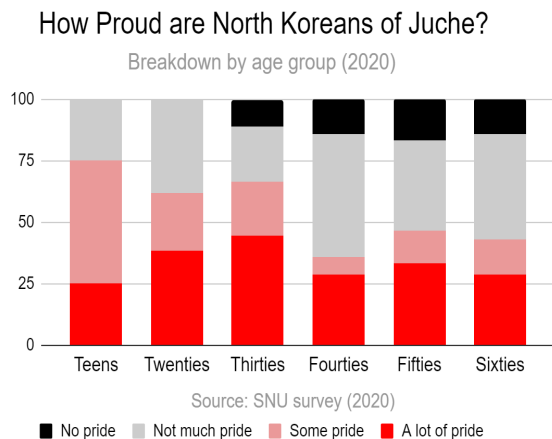
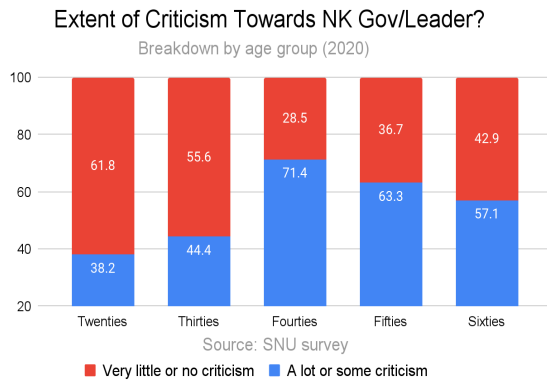
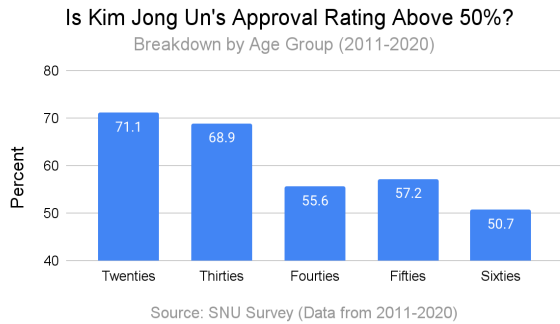
⁷ Ken E. Gause, “North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong Un,” *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, 2015, pp. 2.

⁸ Robert R. King, “North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*,

May 15, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-koreans-want-external-information-kim-jong-un-seeks-limit-access>.

⁹ *Reporters Without Borders*, “The 2023 World Press Freedom Index,” 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-korea>.

¹⁰ Jonathan Corrado, “Rose-Colored Glasses: The Information Ecosystem’s Influence on Generational Variation in Attitudes on North Korea’s Economic Management,” *GWIKS Ideology and Economic Policy in North Korea*, 2022, pp. 46-48, <https://gwiks.elliott.gwu.edu/publications/nkef-publications/>.



What explains these surprising findings? There are a few factors at play. First, the Kim regime has carried out a youth loyalty campaign to generate support for Kim Jong Un and the party. Young people are a captive and malleable audience. Students' days are packed full with Kim family history and ideological training, labor mobilizations, organizational activities, and criticism sessions. The exploits of Kim Il Sung, expounded in a massive eight-part memoir, are akin to a Homeric epic that is genuinely

entertaining to North Korean students. It's even difficult to borrow from the library because of its popularity, according to North Korean refugee Jae Young Kim.¹¹ One North Korean refugee turned activist, Kang Chol Hwan, described his childhood perception of Kim Il Sung as a "Father Christmas" who gifted children sweets and school uniforms.¹² For Kang, who would later be sent to a political prison camp and then defect, this education instilled "a wellspring of admiration and gratitude for our political leaders and in the willingness to sacrifice everything for them."¹³

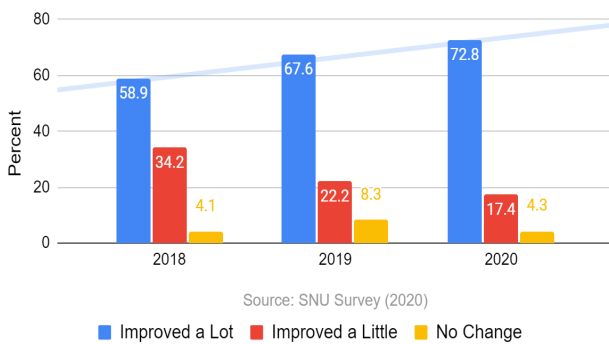
The foreign media crackdown is another factor. The evidence is mixed as to what extent or even whether consumption has declined in recent years, but as former US special envoy for North Korean human rights Ambassador Robert King argues, the crackdown has discouraged "more casual use of foreign media."¹⁴ This can't help but have knock-on effects. Slowly but surely, consuming foreign information transforms North Korean peoples' point of view. Those who consume foreign media tend to have more negative feelings about the North Korean government and its intentions, according to surveys conducted by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland for their book *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*.¹⁵ Significantly, after Kim Jong Un's intensified crackdown on foreign media in 2019, survey respondents became more likely to view state media as credible (over 70%) while the number of skeptics dwindled to about 20%.¹⁶ The lack of disconfirming sources no doubt plays a role in their perception.

Consuming foreign information has the impact of improving kinship ties between North and South. Nearly three quarters of respondents said their perception of South Korea "improved a lot" after consuming South Korean media, according to a 2020 SNU survey. The ability to improve South Korea's image is especially relevant considering that Kim Jong Un recently announced that North Korea would no longer pursue unification and labeled South Korea as the North's "number one enemy."¹⁷

¹¹ Daniel Tudor, *Ask a North Korean* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2017).
¹² Chol-hwan Kang, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York City: Basic Books, 2005).
¹³ Chol-hwan Kang, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, 2005.
¹⁴ Robert R. King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," 2019.
¹⁵ Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2010).

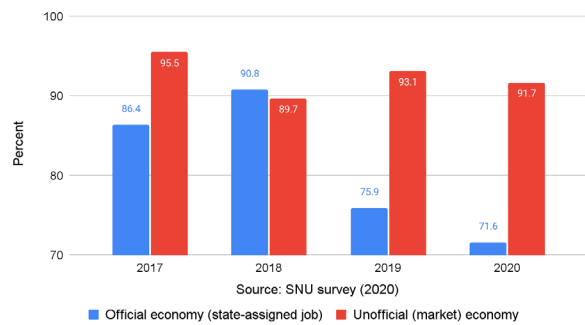
¹⁶ Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*, 2010.
¹⁷ Jeongmin Kim, "Why North Korea declared unification 'impossible,' abandoning decades-old goal," *NK News*, Jan. 1, 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/2024/01/why-north-korea-declared-unification-impossible-abandoning-decades-old-goal/>; Hyung-Jin Kim, "Kim calls South Korea a principal enemy as his rhetoric sharpens in a US election year," *AP News*, January 10, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-rhetoric-tensions-6806461cb93ab62d81c06d5f7922d3d0>.

Did South Korea Appear More Favorable After Consuming South Korean Media?



Finally, young people tend to have rose colored glasses when looking at the government compared to the older cohorts because they have yet to spend any significant time in the sphere of North Korean life that tends to lead to the most antipathy towards the regime: the markets. The portion of North Korean people who participate in the unofficial market economy has risen and remained high during Kim Jong Un’s tenure, while the proportion of respondents who participate in the official (state) economy has steadily diminished. More significantly, only a tiny minority of respondents (13%) earn enough money per month to buy a single kilogram of rice from their state jobs, the SNU survey reveals.¹⁸ This means the vast majority of people rely on market earnings for their household income, and this positions the state as a hindrance to their livelihood rather than a provider. In fact, respondents spent an average of 20% of their earnings on bribes and 46% of people identified “bribes and crackdowns” as the greatest difficulty for their economic activity.¹⁹ This explains why North Korea’s older “money-making” generations have soured on the regime. In contrast, the younger cohorts are busy with school and compulsory military service through their early 30s and therefore have yet to encounter the regime in this light.

Household Participation in Official Economy vs. Markets



Next Steps

Despite Kim Jong Un’s severe crackdowns and harsh punishments, North Korean people remain interested in outside media. This presents an opportunity. Increasing the amount and availability of foreign information inside North Korea will be crucial for: planting the seeds for a civil society, challenging state propaganda that demonizes the outside world, helping North Koreans to understand their human rights, increasing feelings of kinship with South Korea, and promoting conditions that can lead to a soft landing in the long term that makes the peninsula a more stable and prosperous place for all Koreans. It’s especially important to reach young North Koreans to counteract the Kim regime’s information blockade and loyalty campaign, which have proven surprisingly effective.

The United States’ North Korean Human Rights Act, adopted in 2004, appropriates funds for information programs.²⁰ The last iteration of the law authorized the government to spend \$3 million per year to increase “the availability of sources of information not controlled by the Government of North Korea.”²¹ The law enjoys bipartisan support, but it expired in September 2022 and has not yet been reauthorized. Reauthorization bills have been introduced multiple times, for example in the House by Congresswoman Young Kim (R-California) and Congressman Ami Bera (D-California) and in the Senate by Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) and Senator Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), but each of these efforts have ultimately foundered.²² In 2021, the National Endowment for

¹⁸ Corrado, “Rose-Colored Glasses,” pp. 45.

¹⁹ Corrado, “Rose-Colored Glasses,” pp. 47.

²⁰ North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, Pub.L. No. 108-333 (2004), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/4011>.

²¹ North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2017, Pub.L. No. 115-198 (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2061?s=3&r=1&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22reauthorizATIION+North+Korean+Human+Rights+Act+of+2018%22%7D>.

²² Robert R. King, “Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights Confirmed by the Senate, but Still Not in Office at the State Department,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, Oct. 11, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/special-envoy-north-korea-human-rights-confirmed-senate-still-not-office-state-department#:~:text=The%20Senate%20version%20of%20the,North%20Korea%20Human%20Rights%20Act.>

Democracy funded a wide array of creative initiatives, many based in South Korea and staffed by North Korean refugees, to reach the North Korean people such as radio news programs.²³

Amplifying the foreign media presence in North Korea requires a focus on both content and method. It will only be possible to outcompete regime propaganda if the content succeeds in meeting the needs, gaining the trust, and provoking the curiosity of the North Korean people. When asked what types of media North Koreans need the most, the most popular response was “news about South Korean society” (41.5%) followed by “entertainment programs made in South Korea” (18%), according to a 2019 survey by Unification Media Group. Radio broadcasts that feature North Korean defectors provide a familiar voice that North Koreans can relate to. Heavy-handed content that explicitly criticizes the regime is counter-productive because it is reminiscent of North Korean propaganda and poses a danger to any North Korean found consuming it. On the other hand, entertaining and straightforward depictions of ordinary South Koreans going about their lives with the freedom to choose their own jobs and vote for their own government officials can be subtly radicalizing. In addition, actionable content, such as market prices and weather forecasts, can build a foundation of trust, whereupon it is possible to incrementally introduce topics such as universal human rights and civil society. Content should also be differentiated for audiences, such as VOA Korean targeting elites.

Methods for disseminating information also deserve a rethink and revitalization. With the border largely sealed, the most effective way to inject information into the country is currently radio broadcasts. But the regime counteracts radio with signal jamming and surveys suggest that radio is favored by the older generation. Distributing the kind of content favored by the young, like *hallyu* pop music and K-dramas, is typically done manually over the border via memory sticks like USBs and micro SDs. Though old fashioned, this method is beneficial because it provides a source of income for the distributors. However, it is dangerous and very risky. To overcome this, bold new ideas should be

investigated, such as utilizing satellite technology or decentralized mesh networks.²⁴ In this game of cat and mouse with the authorities, the key is to replace old, discoverable methods with new, innovative ones faster than the regime can keep up. There must also be careful analysis of each method to ensure it is easy to use, readily deployable, and shields end users from detection. A balance must also be struck to avoid provoking too forceful a response from the regime.

Conclusion

Kim Jong Un knows that winning the hearts and minds of his country’s youth is a crucial step to ensure the longevity of Kim family rule. For now, Kim has the edge. But outside actors seeking to spread foreign media within North Korea, like the United States and South Korea, have a winning hand, if only they play it right. Doing so can help foster the rudiments of a civil society capable of seeing through the Kim regime’s lies and imagining a brighter future.

²³ National Endowment for Democracy, North Korea 2021, June 15, 2023, <https://www.ned.org/region/asia/north-korea-2021/>.

²⁴ Martyn Williams, “New Satellite Could Provide Internet Access to North Korea...Someday,” 38 North, Oct. 20, 2023,

<https://www.38north.org/2023/10/new-satellite-could-provide-internet-access-to-north-korea-someday/>.

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