

Talking With the Hermit Regime: North Korea, Media, and Communication

Introduction

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This Special Section epitomizes communication scholarship on North Korea with a total of nine articles. Topics vary from news coverage of North Korea and public diplomacy to media representations of North Korea and North Koreans' use of digital media technologies. As the first kind of curated journal dedicated to North Korea-related scholarship in communication, journalism, and media studies, the Special Section aims to stimulate intellectual dialogues among scholars, researchers, and practitioners. The collection of articles offers implications for not only theoretical and methodological perspectives but also policy makers and practitioners alike.

Keywords: North Korea, communication, journalism, media studies

Media and communication researchers are increasingly aware of Western parochialism in their work, effectively leaving many places outside Western Europe and North America terra incognita (Curran & Park, 2000). North Korea is one such place in an extreme sense: Even among the more authoritarian and dictatorial regimes of the world, the country stands out with its government's tight grip on the movement and communication of its citizens (who lack Internet access) and outsiders alike. This—coupled with the physical isolation of the Pyongyang regime in the global arena—has made it difficult for scholars to produce meaningful research about North Korea. Except for a small body of scholarship on foreign media coverage and Pyongyang's state propaganda, scholarly work on communications and media about, within, and around North Korea has been few and far between.

The contrast is all the more glaring considering the growing body of North Korea-related research in other social science disciplines (Armstrong, 2011). In recent years, escalating tensions over its missile and nuclear programs have led to increased media coverage of the country itself. At the same time, North

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Korea has also been opening its doors to the outside world, most notably in the field of news media and information technology. Journalists from the Associated Press and AFP have been allowed to set up permanent bureaus in the capital (Seo, 2018). Domestically, the North Korean government has lifted cellular phone restrictions for the general public, resulting in more than 70% of Pyongyang citizens having access (Seliger & Schmidt, 2014). In 2018–2019, the young North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has engaged in fast-paced diplomacy, meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Such exchanges, many hoped, would result in increased communication between the “Hermit Regime” and the outside world. Given the historic and geopolitical significance of such developments in one of the last hotspots of the Cold War, it would suffice to say that North Korea is emerging as a site worthy of more scholarly inquiry.

Against this backdrop, we made a call in 2018 for theoretically grounded and methodologically sound scholarship that registers this shift in North Korea and examines causes, components, and civic consequences of a uniquely oppressed and isolated—but rapidly changing—country. We received 29 submissions, which underwent rigorous double-blind peer reviews. We are proud to present nine articles (plus an editorial introduction) that touch on the following subjects and themes:

- post-2000 developments regarding media and communication in North Korea, both internally as well as externally;
- emerging norms, practices, and routines on the production and consumption of media in North Korea;
- theoretical and conceptual work on doing communication research in and about North Korea, qualitative as well as quantitative;
- comparative work on media and politics in North Korea, from neighboring countries in Asia and the Socialist Bloc and Europe;
- new perspectives on North Korean citizens and their use and adoption of digital technologies, especially mobile technologies; and
- South Korean citizens’ perceptions and opinions toward North Korea–related media content.

Articles in this Special Section

The leading article by **Soomin Seo** and **Seungahn Nah** provides the backdrop with their survey of communication research concerning North Korea spanning over the last two decades (2000–2019). The systematic review analyzes a total of 85 research articles published in 57 journals, encompassing not only communication fields but also other disciplines such as international relations, political science, or sociology. It shows explosive growth in research after 2009, which is related to escalating international tensions surrounding North Korea’s nuclear program. A notable finding is that prior research excessively examines news media’s coverage in two countries: the United States and South Korea. Studies on information and communication technologies, mobile infrastructure, and popular culture are small but growing. The list also includes media effects and audience research. The authors call for future scholarship with special emphasis on diverse methodological approaches, including audience research in North Korea; comparative studies across the countries, regions, and cultures; and interdisciplinary collaborations at the global contexts.

The call for comparative research is aptly answered by **Martha Kuhnhenh, Micky Lee, and Weiqi Zhang**, who conduct a three-country comparative analysis among North Korea, China, and East Germany to demonstrate how political and economic changes relate to media systems with foreign news media and cultures and vice versa. In doing so, authors rely on the government's control of media ownership and content as well as the sizes of the media economy and the black market across the three countries. Authors also shed light on the flow and consumption of foreign media, as well as the adoption of foreign cultures and political views among citizens in respective countries. The three-country comparison offers distinctive but closely related implications for North Korea: North Korea's adoption of foreign media affecting its political and economic development and civic cultures resembles East Germany rather than China. The authors conclude that, like East Germany, the North Korean government cannot entirely control the adoption and use of foreign media among citizens.

Robert Hinck and **Skye C. Cooley** also depart from the dominant trend in content analysis research, which focuses overwhelmingly on Western media coverage. Instead, they examine how North Korea's news coverage influences other countries' perspectives toward North Korea. Relying on a strategic narrative framework, the authors did a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 1,045 news stories covered by eight progovernment Russian and Chinese news media with high viewership. The authors found that the Russian and Chinese news media helped legitimize the North Korean regime through increasing voices aligned with North Korean narratives and interests. The findings also demonstrate that the penetration of North Korean narratives into Russian and Chinese news stories resulted in strengthening the diplomatic relations between the countries while weakening the U.S. influence on denuclearization.

Ria Chae's article also takes a unique approach to the dearth of communication scholarship on North Korea with a robust historical analysis of North Korea's public relations campaign in American media in the 1970s (1965–1980). Specifically, the study systematically analyzed North Korea-related content from five major U.S. newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, to demonstrate how North Korea's initiatives led successfully to gaining more attention and influence on U.S. policy. The results indicate that North Korea's public campaigns helped its country overcome the barriers in the hierarchy of international information flow.

Kim Jong-un's whirlwind diplomacy in the year 2018—meeting his counterparts in South Korea, the United States, and China—provided a special opportunity for researchers to better understand their research subject. **Sunkyung Choi** focuses on the representation of North Korean media, specifically how they represent the politics of transborder nation-building during the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. She compares the North Korean regime's communication practices before and after the 2018 summit between the two Koreas. For data, she takes advantage of the increasingly available video clips eagerly posted by the North Korean government. Results indicate that North Korean media has shifted their news frames from antagonism to reconciliation for transborder nation-building while legitimizing the North Korean regime as a socialist state. Choi concludes that the media representation in North Korea juxtaposes loyalty to the nation-state through patriotism and nationalism.

Shifting the gaze to public diplomacy of said events, **Julia Sonnevend** and **Youngrim Kim** introduce the concept of "charm offensive," which they define as "a diplomatic strategy in which countries

aim to shift a problematic international image by harnessing their national leader's personal magnetism to the task." With this conceptual framework, the authors examine the extent to which North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's diplomatic strategy influenced news media, especially in the United States, to construct "charming" news stories toward North Korea and its leader. Furthermore, the summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump also played a significant role in reconstructing news discourses from a "little rocket man" to an "honorable leader."

In a similar vein, the article by **Na Yeon Lee, Kanghui Baek, and Sun Ho Jeong** analyzes news frames and tones concerning the North Korean leader's images represented in major U.S. and South Korean newspapers. Content analysis of more than 2,000 news stories reveals that overall newspapers in both countries covered images rather than foreign policy issues. One notable finding is that the ideological spectrum across South Korean newspapers yielded the opposite frames, with conservative newspapers being more negative and liberal newspapers being more positive. However, when the liberal and progressive Moon regime took over power, even conservative newspapers significantly shifted their frames from negative to positive toward North Korea and its leader.

Given its proximity to North Korea as well as linguistic and cultural affinity, South Korea provides a unique environment in which to conduct North Korea-related research. **Yoo Jung Oh, Ji Youn Ryu, and Hee Sun Park** focus on fake news to examine the extent to which exposure to fake news concerning North Korea influences audiences' perception and opinions to support censorship on fake news (others versus me). Relying on third-person and first-person effects, the study conducted two surveys of South Korean adults to assess the effects of North Korea-related fake news on users' experiences and reactions. Findings indicate that survey respondents tend to perceive the impact of fake news to be more influential on others than themselves. Thus, people are in favor of the government's censorship on fake news compared with other types of news stories.

South Korea also hosts the vast majority of North Korean defectors, who provide a unique opportunity to understand North Korean citizens who cannot be contacted directly. **Sunny Yoon's** article examines how North Korean citizens utilize mobile media while the North Korean government controls the adoption and use of digital technologies for public management and propaganda. The study specifically targets younger generations who used mobile media to play mobile games. In doing so, the study adopts a discourse analysis coupled with in-depth interviews with mobile users among North Korean defectors. The author finds that mobile media users amuse themselves through mobile games and digital cultures and routinize daily uses of mobile technologies while resisting the long-established ideology. The author concludes that mobile technologies provide new opportunities for North Korean citizens to build networks inside and outside the country while being controlled by technological governance in North Korea. The author further discusses the implications of mobile technologies on social change and human rights.

A major goal of the Special Section is to firmly establish North Korea as an area of communication research. In addition to the scholars who submitted their manuscripts, we would also like to thank the community of scholars who have reviewed the submissions in a very careful and thorough way. We believe the Special Section offers a great starting point for future scholarship to move forward across different

countries and cultures in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary settings. We are privileged to serve as guest editors and look forward to further intellectual dialogues.

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