A Quiet Opening in North Korea

A QUIET OPENING: NORTH KOREANS IN A CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

[North Korea] has changed a lot. The level of consciousness has increased about everything from what we eat to what we think....Media from outside is definitely causing things to change.”
-26-year-old female from Pyongyang; left North Korea in January 2010

[1]Global watchdog organizations such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders routinely rank the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) as the country with the least free media in the world. Indeed, for more than half a century, North Korea’s leaders have relied on a domestic media monopoly to control what information North Koreans can access and how narratives around that information are presented.

But the situation on the ground is changing, thanks in large part to North Koreans’ expanding access to unsanctioned foreign media and information sources. InterMedia’s A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment [1] documents this evolution based on research among recent North Korean defectors, refugees and travelers abroad.

The project’s assessment of the current state of the media environment in North Korea suggests that substantial numbers of North Koreans are able to access various forms of foreign media. These include foreign TV and radio broadcasts, and particularly foreign DVDs brought into the country from China by cross-border traders and smugglers. Other vectors for information from abroad include smuggled mobile phones capable of receiving foreign signals, and the exchange of illicit foreign content on otherwise legal MP3/MP4 players and USB drives.

“[Accessing foreign media] didn’t change my life, but it changed how I analyzed my life.”
-39-year-old male from Hyesan City; left North Korea in April 2010

Watch the A Quiet Opening Launch Event [2]
A substantial portion of the North Korean population has access to outside media, notably through foreign TV, foreign radio, and foreign DVDs. Mobile phones able to receive foreign signals are playing a smaller role. There is a strong link between foreign media exposure and positive perceptions of the outside world, implying that the influx of foreign media contributes to a more aware North Korean citizenry. Parallel to increased foreign media access is an increased willingness by North Koreans to share information with others they trust, creating an information multiplier effect. Sharing of illegal foreign content is a key factor in strengthening horizontal bonds between North Korean citizens, breaking the state’s top-down monopoly on the supply of information and ideas. DVDs have quickly grown to become the most commonly accessed form of outside media in North Korea. Social norms around foreign DVD viewing appear to be shifting. There is substantial evidence of North Koreans gathering together to watch illegal DVDs. Communication technologies such as computers, USB drives and illegal Chinese mobile phones have begun entering North Korea in substantial numbers in recent years, with use concentrated among political and economic elite. Though other media sources are becoming prevalent, foreign radio broadcasts remain the only source of real-time, sensitive outside news available throughout North Korea. The proliferation of illegal Chinese mobile phones along the Sino-North Korean border has made direct contact with the outside world more possible and has greatly increased the efficiency of cross-border trading, remittances and defection.

KEY REPORT SECTIONS

p. 8 General Media Environment in North Korea - Focus on TV, DVDs and Radio
p. 24 Impact of Media Exposure - The “So What” based on a model of the effects of outside media exposure
p. 38 Foreign Radio Effectiveness
p. 44 Elites and New information Technologies - Who are the Elites and their access to mobile phones, USB Drives and MP3 Players

Contacts for more information about A Quiet Opening:

Nat Kretchun
Principal Author
Associate Director, InterMedia
kretchunn@intermedia.org
[4]

Peter Goldstein
Director of Communications, InterMedia
goldsteinp@intermedia.org [6]

Source URL: