Mapping Communication Research Concerning North Korea:
A Systematic Review (2000–2019)

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Although North Korea is increasingly in the limelight of international news, a systematic review has yet to offer an accumulated body of knowledge regarding North Korea and its related communication scholarship. This study assesses the current state of research on media and communication in, around, and about North Korea from 2000 to June 2019. It examines a total of 85 research articles published in 57 journals. Overall, it finds an explosion in research after 2009. Findings reveal that research overwhelmingly deals with content analysis of Western media coverage, which indicates a strong influence of Cold War binaries. Findings also show that North Korea's media environment has been moving toward more openness and better connectivity. Ultimately, this study finds a need for more comparative research to examine not only content, but also audience and producers—to include those inside North Korea, for which innovative, interdisciplinary approaches are called for.

Keywords: global media, North Korea, research agenda, systematic review

Scholarly interest in North Korea is a relatively new phenomenon. Up until the 1980s, academic and journalistic writings about the country, long known as a "hermit regime," were largely lacking. There was little interest to begin with, North Korea being a small, Easternmost country among communist countries. It did not help that North Korea had been difficult to access—its government and its people. Since the 1990s, however, major changes in international politics have taken place, with rising tensions surrounding North Korea's nuclear and military developments, rapprochement between the two Koreas, and Kim Jong-il's reform drive, as well as mass defection of North Koreans amid growing concerns about the country's human rights record. The global media outlets have been fascinated with a subject full of color

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and contrasts: an impoverished regime surrounded by affluent, powerful neighbors, including China, Russia, and Japan; a time capsule of a communist regime cut off from the rest of the world; and a country ruled by eccentric leaders.

Accordingly, research on North Korea has flourished in disciplines ranging from East Asian studies to international relations and film studies since the 1990s. A significant body of literature has accumulated. Researchers are increasingly using a wide range of data and methods, from archival research and surveys to testimonies by defectors and expatriates (Armstrong, 2011). Authors of scholarly books have looked into various aspects of the North Korean regime and its guiding principles (e.g., Cumings, 2003; Szanlontai, 2006). In recent years, researchers have been moving beyond the politics and security to increasingly look into everyday lives of ordinary people in North Korea (Hassig & Oh, 2009; Ryang, 2009; Smith, 2005). Summarizing such developments in academia, historian Charles Armstrong (2011) concludes that "the study of North Korea is no longer terra incognita in the English-language world" (p. 357).

North Korea's appearance in media and communication research is even more recent when compared with other social science and humanities disciplines. This is noteworthy, considering that it was none other than the media that has offered a window into the regime otherwise inaccessible for researchers. At least some of the gap can be attributed to the Western parochialism in media research, with most of the "global" research being based on West European or North American examples (J. Curran & Park, 2000). However, the volume of research by media and communication scholars has increased steadily, along with the overall rise of research on North Korean society and culture. There has not yet been an attempt to systematically and critically assess the state of research in the English-speaking world.

The goal of this article is thus to provide a topology of communication scholarship involving North Korea. It offers a systematic review of 85 studies since 2000. We begin with a brief overview of the research, followed by quantitative and qualitative findings that we have been able to identify. We then discuss some of the issues and suggest future directions for research.

Method: A Systematic Review

Search Strategy

As a systematic review, this article set out to include all peer-reviewed scholarly articles concerning North Korea in communication and media research. A systematic review is defined as a method to make sense of large bodies of information (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). It seeks to identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant research, allowing researchers to overcome the limitations of a single study. Researchers can not only detect trends in research, but also find gaps in research agendas and methodological, theoretical approaches. Systematic review is particularly useful when the field is immature, and not many studies exist in a given area.

We adopted methods used by Comfort and Park (2018), who looked into peer-reviewed articles in journals and excluded books on the subject. For a methodological framework in a country-level systematic review, we used work by Li and Tang (2012), who analyzed mass communication research at the country

level. As for the time frame, we included all studies published between 2000 and June 2019. The year 2000 was chosen because it marked the year that North Korea resumed summit diplomacy with South Korea, followed by restoration of diplomatic relations with Western countries. The chosen period also saw an explosion of North Korea-related news, from South Korea's "Sunshine" policy of rapprochement to the escalation of nuclear tensions and the ascent of Kim Jong-un to power. In a pretest of search criteria, we found that works at the juncture of North Korea and communication are largely absent before 2000, with notable exceptions such as Clippinger's (1981) work on Kim Jong-il's communication style, and ethnographic research from 1951 by Schramm and Riley.

We conducted searches on two major academic databases: Web of Science and EBSCOhost. Web of Science is considered the most complete collection of scholarly literature and includes the Social Sciences Citation Index and the Arts & Humanities Index. EBSCOhost, although less inclusive, has the advantage of having a curated collection of scholarly journals in two fields relevant to our research: Bibliography of Asian Studies, and Communication & Mass Media Complete. On the aforementioned databases, we conducted searches using the following word combination in the abstracts: ['North Korea' AND media OR 'North Korea' AND communication]. After removing duplicates and obvious noncommunication articles from the natural sciences, the two databases yielded a preliminary sample of 213 articles.

From this list, we selected 85 articles based on the following criteria. First, studies must belong to field of communication studies or communications. We used the definition by Jones and Holmes (2012), who described communication studies as research on interpersonal and mass communication processes. Specifically, they stated that communication research deals with the "abstract and impersonal systems and means of communication that make possible realities not visible within interpersonal communication, such as the 'audience,' ideology, cyberculture, hegemony, mass, the 'popular,' public sphere, and network society" (p. 25). Second, in the case of articles published in journals from other disciplines, such as international relations, political science, or sociology, communication had to constitute the core of research rather than be a theme or subject area. For example, we selected Seliger and Schmidt's 2014 article on North Korea's Internet use and communication policy because the article dealt primarily with the media communication environment in North Korea. However, Yoo Hyang Kim's 2004 article "North Korea's Cyberpath" was not chosen because communication technology was used to explain industrial and economic development in North Korea, which constituted the core of this research.

Because the goal of our project was to analyze the state of quality academic research that could withstand the scrutiny of peer review, we excluded dissertations, media reviews, and invited pieces. Also excluded are the more practically oriented white papers and book chapters. Similarly, we only chose English-language articles, omitting a considerable body of literature in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. Our method obviously has shortcomings, the implications of which are discussed in the conclusion.

Unit of Analysis and Coding Scheme

The unit of analysis was the research article. Variables coded for each article included the following: *publication year*, *journal type*, *research subject*, *research method*, *analysis focus*, and *vantage point*. For publication year, we coded the final year the paper ran in print if one was available. The journal type

determined whether the journal publishing the article belonged to Scimago's list (2018) of media communication journals. For research subject, we coded the most important subject or topic the authors dealt with in the article. We derived the research subject subcategories inductively as the analysis proceeded, classifying subjects into five broad categories:

- Journalistic content and producers
- Information technology and policy
- Popular culture, music, sports, and everyday life
- Media effects and audience studies
- Other (if the subject did not belong to any of the above)

For vantage point, we coded the physical location of the data or subject being analyzed. We chose to look for the location of the research subject or data rather than nationality of researchers. This decision was made because of the unique circumstances of research about North Korea: Physically, all the articles were written by those residing outside North Korea. Furthermore, determining nationality of researchers was difficult. Although many articles were written by scholars of Korean descent, judging from their surnames, determining their nationality with a separate survey or questionnaire was realistically not possible. Multiple vantage points were allowed—for instance, in comparative research using data from different countries.

The research method refers to the primary method, "qualitative," "quantitative," or "mixed" (both quantitative and qualitative methods). For analysis focus, we coded "content" if the article dealt primarily with media content, "audience" if it dealt primarily with audience, and "producer" if it dealt primarily with content producers.

Two PhD students in communication studies conducted the coding. They read the articles independently and determined whether they belonged to the field of communication and media studies. If a difference emerged, the coders were instructed to have a discussion until a consensus was reached. To test intercoder reliability, we randomly selected 20% of articles to be coded independently by the second coder. The Krippendorff's alpha coefficient was 0.84, which was deemed sufficient (Krippendorff, 2004). Overall intercoder agreement was 96.69%.

Quantitative Findings

Papers Published by Year

Overall, we found media and communication studies on North Korea to be a recent phenomenon. Of a total 85 studies, the years between 2000 and 2008 saw only six articles, with an overwhelming majority (79) published after 2008. As Figure 1 shows, 2009 marked a turning point. One likely possibility is the rising tensions surrounding North Korea after its first nuclear test in 2006. This would explain the spike three years later, taking into consideration academic publication schedule for journals, which requires lengthy peer reviews and revisions.
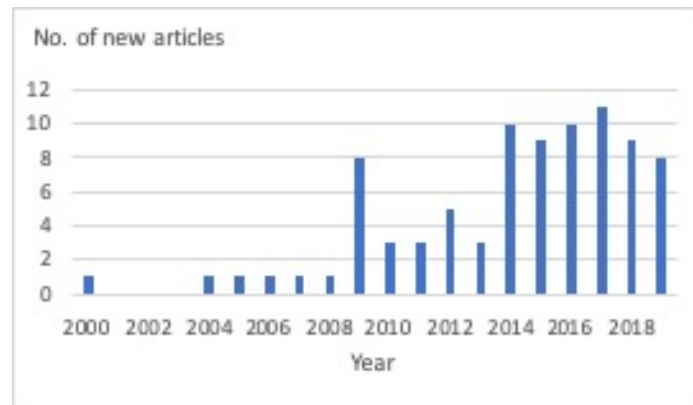
*Figure 1. Number of articles published by year.*

Journal Type

Of the 85 articles we selected, 38 (45%) were published in media and communication journals. More than half—47 articles (56%)—ran in journals belonging to other social sciences and humanities disciplines. Of those, political science and international relations were clearly dominant. This can be seen from the titles of the most commonly found journals (number of articles in parenthesis): *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* (5); *Korea Observer* (3); and *North Korean Review* (3). Among the media and communication journals, *Asian Journal of Communication* (3), *International Communication Gazette* (3), and *International Journal of Communication* (3) were most prominent.

The results also represent the interdisciplinary nature of media and communication studies, which often overlaps with—and indeed borrows frequently from—these disciplines. It also shows the importance of media content in studying North Korea; researchers from various disciplines rely on North Korea's state media, which offers a limited but reliable window into the country.

Research Subject

As Figure 2 and Table 1 show, articles about news and news content and journalists were clearly dominant, making up a whopping 62% (53 of 85 articles). Within this category, content analysis (48 articles) emerged as the baseline of North Korea-related research, while five dealt with journalistic producers via surveys and interviews.

Our results show that scholars studying North Korea and media are more likely to analyze media coverage of international media, rather than North Korean media itself. Of 48 content analysis articles, 36 dealt exclusively with foreign countries such as the U.S., South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan. Only six articles analyzed North Korean media content, exclusively or in comparison with news content from neighboring countries such as South Korea, China, and Russia. A handful dealt with Western European, Australian, and Singaporean media. Analysis of media content in South Asia, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa was nonexistent.
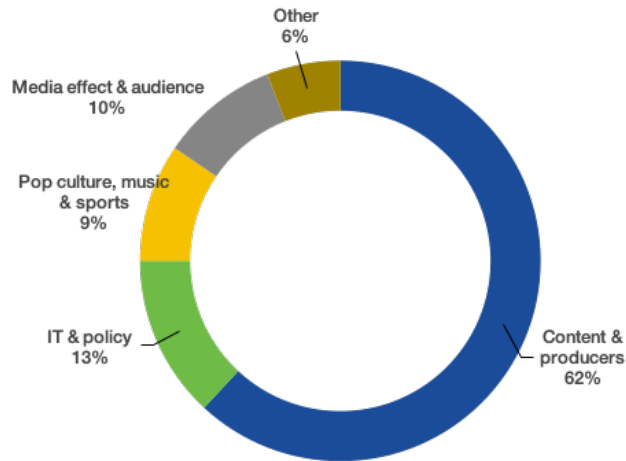
Figure 2. Subject of research.

Articles dealing with information technology constituted 13% of the body of research. Of these, works dealing with the Internet and mobile infrastructure made up a little more than half (6), followed by those dealing with the underground consumption of foreign media and policy pieces on potential soft power (3), as well as the potential use of information technology for cyberwarfare (2).

Works on popular culture, music, and sports made up less than 10% (8 of 85) and were clustered around the influence of the "Korean Wave" of South Korean entertainment content (3), North Korea's girl band Moranbong (3), and other works on music and tourism.

A total of eight articles fell into the bucket of media effect and audience research conducted by strategic communication and political communication scholars. Five were survey based, and two were experiment based.

Table 1. Subject and subcategory of research.

Main subject (no. of articles)	Subcategory (no. of articles)
Journalistic content & producers (53)	International news media (36)
	N. Korean news media (6)
	International & N. Korean news media (6)
	News producers (5)
IT & policy (11)	Internet & mobile infrastructure (6)
	Digital underground (3)
	Cyberwarfare (2)
Popular culture, music, & sports (8)	Korean Wave (3)
	Moranbong band (3)
	Other (2)
Media effect & audience (8)	Surveys (5)
	Experiments (2)
	Other (1)
Other (5)	
Total (85)	

National Vantage Point

Table 2 shows that overall, a majority of articles were written from the vantage point of the United States and South Korea. Like journalists who seek to "domesticate" foreign affairs for the home audience (Gurevitch, Levy, & Roeh, 1991), scholars' academic inquiries often start from where they are based—in this case, the United States and South Korea. We could not find a single paper authored by North Korean scholars. However, the non–North Korean scholars were increasingly writing from the vantage point of North Korea by looking into unofficial avenues such as entertainment and underground media and by interviewing North Korean defectors.

Table 2. National vantage point of research data and subject.
*Combined total, multiple countries allowed.

Country	No. of articles*
North Korea	32
South Korea	35
United States	28
Japan	8
China	7
Russia	2
Australia	3
United Kingdom	7
Germany	1
Denmark, Norway, Sweden	1
France	1
Singapore	1

South Korea emerged as the biggest site of research. South Korea has unique cultural and historic linkages with North Korea as well as physical proximity, sharing a long border that separates the peninsula. Because the two Koreas share a language, South Korean scholars have been particularly active in research related to North Korea. In addition, many scholars of South Korean descent are active in the international research scene, including in the United States. The Korean-American Communication Association, the biggest association of Korean media and communication scholars in the United States, has more than 500 members (KACA, 2019).

The United States was the next biggest vantage point of research, appearing a combined total of 35 times, including comparative research. Comparative research between the United States and South Korea was a trend, with a total of seven articles. Japan and China, as neighbors of North Korea and participants in regional, multilateral dialogue about North Korea, such as the six-party talks, also appeared eight and seven times, respectively. Within Asia, Australia and Singapore appeared, due possibly to their active participation in the Anglo-American media and global academia. Research works from Europe outside the United Kingdom were few and far between. Still, overall, our findings indicate that North Korea has emerged as a global and multinational research agenda and site.

Qualitative Findings

Content Analysis and Framing Research

The global media is fascinated with North Korea, much more so than with South Korea (N. M. Curran & Gibson, 2019). Research about journalistic content and journalists makes up as much as 61% (52 of 85) of the research we found about North Korea. Of those, framing research is the most prominent, making up half (26 articles) of all articles in the category. *Framing* refers to the cognitive simplification process, an organizing principle that provides meaning to real-world events and allows the audience to make sense of them (Durham, 1998; Tuchman, 1978). Media frames reflect the socially dominant ideologies and political values (Gitlin, 1980). Framing analysis shows that ideological confrontation and "us vs. them" frames continue to dominate journalism about North Korea. Among Anglo-American media, this translated into negative coverage. Coverage is less hawkish among South Korean, Russian, and Chinese media, which was more likely to adopt frames stressing peace and economic development.

How the Outside World Sees North Korea

Scholars have shown how framing of foreign news reflected the cultural stereotypes of the media's home countries (Entman, 1991; Herman, 1993; C.-C. Lee & Yang, 1996; Norris, 1995). In North Korea, this has resulted in coverage that is not only negative, but also demonizing and sensationalistic (Choi, 2010, 2018; Dalton, Jung, Willis, & Bell, 2016; K.-H. Kim, 2014; Y. Kim & Jahng, 2016). In their analysis of American media after President George W. Bush condemned North Korea as one of the "Axis of Evil" alongside Iran and Iraq in 2002, J. Lim and Seo (2009) find that the three frames observed—portraying North Korea primarily as a military threat, human rights violator, and dialogue partner—competed against each other. Moreover, they found a reciprocal relationship in the frames, with the American government and the news media influencing each other.

Boudana and Segev (2017) show how provocation narratives introduce political bias in international news about North Korea. Using network analysis and quantitative content analysis of Western news narratives about North Korea, they find North Korea to appear much more often than China or Russia. Furthermore, when journalists introduce North Korea as provocateur, they tend to omit mention of the reasons behind North Korea's provocation—thereby shifting the blame from core powerful countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, to their opponents. In other words, they conclude that news about North Korea sorely lacks impartiality.

Dalton et al. (2016) find news coverage of North Korea in Australia to be equally negative and one-dimensional. The headlines describing North Korea are dehumanizing and reductive. Five metaphors to describe the regime and its leader are identified: military threat; unpredictable, irrational, and ruthless; isolated and secretive; cruel dystopia; and impoverished. Other works, such as that from West (2017), also show that the media primed the audience for wars and conflicts by mentioning North Korea's criminality without historical context.

Lynn (2006) analyzes how Japanese television covers North Korea and how this generates public perception of the country. Using survey, programming, and audience data, he finds Japanese TV airwaves saturated with abduction stories, many of them personalized stories of "vicarious traumas" relived through TV. This, coupled with the volume and intensity of messages, not only resulted in high ratings, but also led to the creation of an "evil, external Other" (p. 507) among the viewers.

Gusterson (2008) offers a scathing criticism of the media's coverage of North Korea in the United States. He notes that journalists do not mention the basic premise surrounding North Korea's nuclear program: that the United States has failed to deliver on its promise in a 1994 agreement to ease sanctions and build nuclear power plants by 2003. Instead of showing the rationale of both sides, American media provides a simplistic narrative that North Korea has been caught red-handed with an illicit nuclear program.

Such coverage in the Western media contrasts with news from South Korea. Although South Korea bears animosity toward North Korea, its media coverage is less negative and more nuanced. South Korean media is more likely to use peace frames and emphasize reconciliation on the Korean peninsula (Choi, 2010, 2018; Y. Kim & Jahng, 2016). Also, China and Russia overwhelmingly adopt a peace journalism frame, focusing more on nonviolent compromises and voices of the common people (M.-Y. Chung, Lessman, & Fan, 2014). The differences also have to do with the fact that certain countries—such as Russia and China—have the capacity to report from the ground in Pyongyang, thanks to historical affinities.

Holiday, Anderson, Lewis, and Nielsen (2019) analyze visual framing of photographs taken by David Guttenfelder of the Associated Press, who had unprecedented access to North Korea after the country allowed the news agency to open a Pyongyang bureau in 2012. Although U.S. news outlets vary greatly in the proportion of coverage portraying North Korea in a totalitarian frame, many are using Guttenfelder's photos, which portray everyday lives of North Koreans minus the political oppression. The authors attribute this to journalists' news routines—particularly a desire to balance out coverage, given that dominant coverage of North Korea had been so negative.

News Norms and Journalistic Role Conception

With their hierarchy of influences model, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have discussed the different layers of forces that affect how journalists do their jobs, from the individual and media-routine levels to the organizational, social institution, and social system levels. Combining survey and content analysis, H. Seo (2009) tests the hierarchy of influences model on South Korean and Western journalists. She finds that influence of factors varied according to the nature of the issues covered by journalists. When discussing the negative, rogue state dimension of North Korea, credibility of official American or South Korean sources has a significant influence on journalists. When it comes to portraying North Korea as a dialogue partner, journalists' nationality overrides other factors by far.

A central part of journalists' professional identity lies in their presenting themselves as objective and impartial (Schudson, 1995). Journalistic role conception is the subject of a subsequent paper based on the same corpus of survey-based research by H. Seo (2011). Again, significant differences are observed based on nationality, with the South Korean journalists perceiving themselves much more strongly as participants in the negotiations process, as compared with Western reporters, who adopt a more observant role.

Information Technology and Policy in a More Porous North Korea

A total of 11 articles deal with the ever-prominent role of information technology in North Korea—including the Internet and mobile phones—discussing the political and economic implications. Although most agree that there have been tectonic shifts in the communication environment, scholars remain divided on its political implications.

Growth of the Internet, Intranet, and Cell Phones

North Korea has strategically nurtured the IT sector since the 1990s, seeing it primarily as a tool of economic development (Chen, Ko, & Lee, 2010). Much of it can be traced to Kim Jong-il, who in 1990 founded the Korea Computer Center (Seliger & Schmidt, 2014; Warf, 2015). Korea Computer Center developed software such as the Red Star operating system and the Naenara ("my country" in Korean) browser. These efforts intensified in the early 2000s, with North Korea partnering with foreign companies in Germany, China, Japan, and Thailand to open its first websites—which dealt mostly with news, propaganda, and business opportunities. Only top officials, elite researchers, and foreigners can access the Internet (Seliger & Schmidt, 2014). For the domestic population, North Korea has built an intranet entirely cut off from the World Wide Web.

Another crucial development was the introduction of cellular phones to the general public in 2008. Cellular phones were first introduced to the party elite in 2002, but confiscated two years later when an explosion triggered by a mobile phone almost killed Kim Jong-il (Noland, 2009; Seliger & Schmidt, 2014). The ban was lifted in 2004, and in 2008, the phones became available to everyone; an estimated 50% of the population have access to service. These phones do not have Internet or international calling features, and minutes are capped at 200 minutes per phone.

What are the political implications of these changes? Some scholars are cautiously optimistic. Although North Korea will continue to control the flow of information and censor or block it, Lerner (2015) predicts that the sheer volume of communication will make it difficult for the state to monitor and track all exchanges, thereby creating opportunities for social change in North Korea.

Scholars also detail the extensive—and overwhelming—penetration of foreign culture in North Korea. South Korean TV dramas and American films have already become part of the cultural fabric. Despite harsh penalties, citizens routinely smuggle in USB sticks and micro SD cards. Mobile phones in particular have had a profound impact on the flow of information (Lerner, 2015; Seliger & Schmidt, 2014). Given this, Lerner suggests that the best course of action for the U.S. is to adopt a policy of "strategic patience"—essentially to wait it out until soft power tools such as popular culture further penetrate North Korea.

Researchers have also drawn comparisons to other Eastern Bloc and communist countries. Ko, Lee, and Jang (2009) predict that North Korea will gradually but irreversibly open up its Internet, initially following Cuba's control policy and ultimately adopting the Chinese model of allowing regular citizens access with firewalls, censorship, and surveillance. Chen et al. (2010) predict that North Korea will use the Internet as a tool of propaganda, in addition to taking advantage of its economic benefits.

Cyberwarfare and Building of the Digital Underground

In addition to having economic uses, North Korea's digital technologies also serve the dual purpose of propaganda, which some believe amounts to extensive cyberwarfare as part of the regime's military programs. Warf (2015) details the four known cyberwarfare units in North Korea—modeled after a similar unit in the Chinese People's Liberation Army—that have achieved notoriety in recent years. The units are suspected to have launched attacks on South Korean and U.S. targets, ranging from newspaper companies to banks. Citing works by Morozov (2011), Warf (2015) predicts that North Korea will join other dictatorships in embracing digital technologies to increase surveillance and stifle dissent. A similar view of pessimism pervades J. Kim's (2005) analysis of North Korean websites. She states that the sites are part of the psychological warfare targeted primarily at South Koreans, and she finds them gaining influence among some South Koreans. Kshetri (2014) notes that South Korea is particularly vulnerable because of high dependence on digital technologies.

So what are North Korea's own vulnerabilities? Lankov (2011) thinks that a determined, low-profile information campaign can work thanks to a porous border with China and the availability of cheap portable devices. Drawing from defector interviews, Baek (2017) documents the growing digital underground market in North Korea, where citizens have already become information seekers.

In some cases, information technology literally helped people escape from North Korea. Based on interviews, Kang, Ling, and Chib (2018) show the crucial role of mobile phones in the lives of female defectors from North Korea. Many of the women used smuggled Chinese phones to talk to family members already in China or South Korea and connect with brokers. Once they arrived in South Korea, however, the cell phones became another lifeline, necessary for everything from bus schedules to making payments.

Popular Culture, Music, and Sports: Views From the Inside

Of eight articles on popular culture, music, and sports, three deal with the influence of K-pop and other South Korean popular entertainment, and another three with the girl band Moranbong from the Kim Jong-un era.

The growing availability of North Korean defectors—whose numbers have increased more than tenfold since 2000—offers a unique window to understand everyday media use among North Koreans, including entertainment and popular culture. Six articles reached out to defectors for primary data. Yoon (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with adolescent defectors to learn about their media practices before they left the country. She finds that young people enjoy foreign—particularly South Korean—films and TV shows banned in North Korea. This creates a visual fantasy in a repressive society, potentially contributing to social change. Similarly, K.-Y. Chung (2019) finds that younger North Koreans who watched South Korean TV were motivated to defect. She concludes that South Korean media acts a soft power influencing North Koreans' lifestyles and perceptions, possibly contributing to fundamental changes in North Korean society.

Y.-J. Lim and Lemanski (2017) focus on the Demilitarized Zone that separates the two Koreas; there, the North Korean government could not prevent its soldiers from listening to South Korean songs, which had been aired over loudspeakers. They find that the K-pop songs were effective in stirring up emotions among North Korean soldiers.

The all-female pop band Moranbong rose to stardom in the Kim Jong-un era with personal patronage of the leader. Unusual for North Korea, Moranbong's music has a strong pop beat, due possibly to the influence of K-pop. Its visual aesthetic too is comparable to South Korean girl bands, with members once donning white miniskirts. More important, when Moranbong members interact with Kim Jong-un, there is friendliness, in great contrast to the crying and screaming observed when previous North Korean leaders interacted with musicians. Using Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, Zeglen (2017) concludes that the band shows the creation of a "celebrity dictator," one capable of negotiating the presence of potentially disruptive foreign popular culture. However, a more recent article by Korhonen and Cathcart (2017), based primarily on North Korean YouTube videos, differs in its analysis. They note that although Moranbong may have started out as a symbol of possible liberalization, the band's aesthetics became more conservative over time, with less individuality.

Combining video and textual analysis, J. Lee (2009) analyzes how North Korean media portrays its highly successful female boxers on the international stage. On first glimpse, one sees an indication of a "red feminism," with no sexualized, objectified portrayal of female athletes. Instead, they are portrayed as fighters in a war. On closer scrutiny, however, one sees the nationalistic patriarchy subordinating their bodies. The athletes are the "nation's daughters" who show off the military prowess. Parental support of the leader—who is a man—is what made the athletic achievement possible.

New Approaches and Call for Future Research

This article sought to map the nascent field of media and communication research in, about, and around North Korea in peer-reviewed English-language journals from 2000 to 2019. We found a total of 85

articles, fewer than half of which came from journals outside communication studies. That a majority of articles have been published since 2009 indicates that research has just gotten started.

Methodologically, content analysis is the most common, including comparative methods. Qualitative (50%, 43 articles) and quantitative (45%, 38 articles) methods are used with similar frequency, but only four articles used mixed methods. Researchers are increasingly using automated content analysis (Boudana & Segev, 2017; Cao & Liu, 2019; K.-H. Kim, 2014; Y.-H. Kim, Kang, & Lee, 2018; Rich 2012a, 2012b, 2014) and interviewing defectors as well as journalists (Moon, 2018; S. Seo, 2018, 2019; Yoon, 2015). Surveys (Lynn, 2006; H. Seo, 2009, 2011), interviews (Moon, 2018; Yoon, 2015), and network analysis (Jung & Park, 2014) have also been used.

Thematically, an outright majority of research looked into journalistic content. Research on the greater communication environment, with the introduction of cellular phones and domestic intranet, is also growing. Research finds a growing underground media consumption. Some think that such consumption could lead to major changes in the regime, whereas others warn that the new digital tools will empower the North Korean state.

Our review also reveals gaps in the research. Research that directly involves North Koreans, either as researchers or as research subjects, is missing. Although North Korean scholars in the natural sciences have been publishing in international journals, works by North Korean scholars in the humanities and social science are virtually nonexistent (Jeong & Huh, 2018). A related limitation of this research is that we confined our search to English-language works, thereby omitting the greatest body of research in South Korea—which shares its language with North Korea. An exploratory search on RISS (riss.kr), a South Korean academic database, using the same search query and parameter of "North Korea" (북한) and "media" (매체, 언론) "communication" (커뮤니케이션), revealed 114 journal articles from 2000 to June 2019. In addition to South Korean research, future research should also look into research in Chinese, Japanese, and Russian academia, especially given that their scholars have access to North Korea.

Our review also shows the need for more comparative, multinational, and multiregional research. Noteworthy in this aspect is M.-Y. Chung and colleagues' (2014) research involving five countries. Research from Mobrand and Tingbacke (2018) is also comparative, looking into news coverage from three Scandinavian countries. Comparing their significance and influence when it comes to North Korea, more research on the Eastern Bloc and communist countries—for example, Germany, Cuba, and Central Asian countries—is sorely needed.

Also, media and communication researchers can learn a lot from reading the works of, and potentially cooperating with, researchers from other social science fields, which have formidable amounts of literature on North Korea. Particularly noteworthy are interdisciplinary, innovative approaches in studying North Korea. For example, Cathcart, Green, and Denny (2014) triangulate data from three very different sources to understand the information strategies of the new North Korean leader: press conferences of "redefectors" who have returned to North Korea after defecting; sports propaganda celebrating feats of North Korean athletes in the Kim Jong-un era; and the use of popular music featuring reformist aesthetics.

By doing so, they find that the Kim regime is surprisingly receptive in its messaging, realizing the need to respond to, refuse, co-opt, and manipulate the burgeoning array of information spreading in the society.

As North Korea becomes more porous, there could be more opportunities for research using a wider range of approaches and methods. For example, W.-Y. Lee (2019) shows that South Korean scholars have begun to interview current North Korean residents directly from the Chinese side and are also increasingly exploring novel data sources such as United Nations statistics and Google Maps. Veteran North Korea researcher Kim Young-soo (Y.-S. Kim, 2019) suggests that future researchers de-emphasize specificity of North Korea and strive for works that can strike a chord across disciplines and regions. "Scholars need to overcome ideological lenses in seeing North Korea and seek to study North Korea as is," he said.

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