

Articles

# How Authoritarian Regimes Maintain Domain Consensus: North Korea's Information Strategies in the Kim Jong-un Era

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## Pyongyang's Strategic Shift

North Korea is a society under constant surveillance by the apparatuses of state, and is a place where coercion—often brutal—is not uncommon.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not the whole story. It is inaccurate to say that the ruling hereditary dictatorship of the Kim family exerts absolute control purely by virtue of its monopoly over the use of physical force.

The limitations of state coercion have grown increasingly evident over the last two decades. State-society relations in North Korea shifted drastically when Kim Jong-il came to power in the 1990s. It was a time of famine, legacy politics, state retrenchment, and the rise of public markets; the state's coercive abilities alternated between dissolution and coalescence as the state sought to co-opt and control the marketization process, a pattern which continued until Kim Jong-il's death in 2011 (Kwon and Chung 2012; Hwang 1998; Hyeon 2007; Park 2012). Those relations have moved still further under Kim Jong-un.<sup>2</sup> Though Kim's rise to the position of Supreme Leader in December 2011 did not precipitate—as some had hoped—a paradigmatic shift in economic or political approach, the state has been extremely active in the early years of his era, responding to newfound domestic appreciation of North Korea's situation in both the region and wider world.

In order to sustain its political dominance, the Kim government needs to prevent, refute, co-opt, and manipulate a burgeoning array of information spreading in society. Enhancing security along the country's porous northern border or forcefully relocating civilians is not sufficient to assert control over flows of information, which

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1. The execution of Jang Song-taek in December 2013 was surely a prime indicator that coercion and the specter of state terror remain part of Pyongyang's arsenal. At the same time, the scope of the actual purge was limited. For historical comparisons, see Harris 2013.
2. We employ revised romanization for all Korean names and places in this paper, with the exception of some that are already well known to most readers in a different form, most notably Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Il-sung.

can inspire people to leave, to contribute *in situ* to delegitimizing the regime, or just to make hitherto unheard of demands of the state.<sup>3</sup> Thus, unable or unwilling to prevent information entering completely, the state faces challenges to its legitimacy (Kretchun and Kim 2012, 37).

As a response, changes have been carefully implemented. Under the titular direction of Kim Jong-un, there have been adjustments to the state's internal information strategies.<sup>4</sup> These adjustments are strategic, designed to address areas of incongruence between the state and its external task environment. The state is attempting to redefine its "reciprocity of expectations" with society.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Objective and Scope Conditions

This interdisciplinary research is predominantly concerned with the "state" and its administrative interaction with societal actors through multiple "information strategies," which in turn constitute reciprocity of expectations. In order to analyze the information strategies employed under Kim Jong-un, we draw from three heuristically rich lines of inquiry: governmentality, studies of state-society relations, and organizational/institutional theory, specifically James Thompson's concept of "domain consensus," which was later applied in political science by Thomas Callaghy. It is this latter conception of how state-society relations can be structured that we place at the spine of our theoretical approach.

In the most general sense, "government" is an activity executed by the state that shapes the scope of human conduct by setting the boundaries of what is

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3. The South Korean Ministry of Unification (2014a) publishes statistics on a range of inter-Korean matters. The categories include data on numbers of arriving defectors, and this shows that 1,514 defectors entered South Korea in 2013. This is more than the figures in 2012 (1,502 arrivals), the first year of Kim Jong-un's rule, but a far cry from the 2,914 defectors that arrived in the South in 2009.

4. The question of Kim Jong-un's personal role in the shaping of policy is not one that we take up in depth in this paper, but it continues to prompt varying levels of critical analysis. Contrasting views can be found in Jang Jin-sung's *Dear Leader* (2014) and "Kim Jong Un: North Korea's Supreme Leader or Puppet?" (*The Guardian* 2014a).

5. It is important to note that this research concerns normative mechanisms of authoritarian control. It does not have explanatory power in terms of authoritarian power-sharing, which concerns intra-elite dynamics. For more detail on the conceptual difference between these two terms, see Svobik 2012, 3-13.

and is not acceptable behavior.<sup>6</sup> It is a deliberate attempt on the part of those governing to influence, regulate, and control the governed. To study “the art of government,” what is typically called “governmentality,” means, according to Mitchell Dean, to “analyze those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (Dean 2010, 20).

In liberal regimes, government normally channels the free will of individuals constrained by the rule of law, which has itself been shaped with public input. This method acknowledges the people’s liberal relationship with the government, albeit with the credible threat of violence in reserve, a threat that is clearly codified in advance in the form of legislation. Conversely, in authoritarian modes individual freedom is bounded, often to a significant extent, and the ends of government are not dictated by or validated through the people but by alternate means—including coercion applied, often deliberately, on an arbitrary basis.

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that authoritarian regimes *always* use coercion to shape the field of action and individual autonomy. Even in North Korea, a highly repressive example, there must be “reciprocity of expectations,” as Max Weber understood it (Bendix 1977, 279), between the governed and the governing.<sup>7</sup> Weber pointed to three “pure types” of legitimate rule—legal, traditional, and charismatic; any one of these, he held, “[l]oses its character by persistently violating the limitation that is based on the reciprocity of expectations between ruler and ruled.” Such a reading of state-society relations, based on mutual adherence to expectations, can be reframed, in the words of Stephen Krasner (1984, 226), as the problem of “conformity or congruence of the state with its environment.” What Krasner calls “public stasis and private dynamism” generates friction, until such time as the former responds to dynamically emerging societal demands (Krasner 1984, 234).<sup>8</sup>

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6. Our understanding of the basic function of government is informed by the literature on “governmentality” and can be read in Mitchell Dean’s (2010) writing on the subject.

7. Thomas Callaghy (1980) channels Weber’s idea of the reciprocity of expectations using Reinhard Bendix’s (1977) definitive work *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*.

8. In his 1984 review article, “Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics,” Krasner was concerned with how the latest literature was dealing with “the state” as a

This is precisely what is taking place in North Korea today. In this paper we are concerned with how the state—both as an actor and as an arena of action—adjusts its information strategies to meet these new circumstances.

The state seeks to establish general consensus on reciprocity of expectations. There are three specific types of consensus, defined by their fundamental nature: voluntary/normative, utilitarian, and coercive. All states employ all three types to a varying degree: together they constitute “domain consensus,” or, a state-society consensus on the domain of the state.

In his examination of Zaire under President Mobutu Sese Seko, political scientist Thomas Callaghy examines domain consensus at length, describing the concept as that which allows “societal groups and administrative agents to understand the role of the state, what it will and will not do, as well as the locus and extent of political power” (1980, 469). According to Callaghy, domain consensus is formed around three inter-connecting planes upon which state-society interactions take place.

The first plane is the voluntary and normative. This form of consensus exists when citizens acquiesce to the right of a ruler(s) to rule, and voluntarily adhere to the norms that obtain under the prevailing system of governance.

Democratic elections, which generate majority rule, are among the most effective ways of sustaining a normative domain consensus. A dictatorship, which by definition lacks the legitimating narrative of free and open elections, must rely predominantly on propaganda to achieve the same or similar result (*The Guardian* 2014b). With that being said, as Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way (2013, 880) have shown, all dictatorships are not created equal. Revolutionary heritage is also an effective tool in sustaining a voluntary domain consensus (Kwon and Chung 2012, 188). Conversely, dictatorial regimes that come to power through a coup d'état or external fiat do not tend to have a background of mass action upon which to fall back; they must derive their legitimacy from other sources, such as economic growth like that seen in South

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conceptual variable and institutional change over time. Writing from a statist perspective, Krasner and his cohort of political scientists in the 1980s and 1990s sought to contemplate the relationship between the state and society using an institutional approach. Many of the “new” institutionalists writing today (e.g., Thelen and Mahoney 2010) have developed more elaborate theories and typologies for understanding institutional change and state-society relations; nevertheless, for purposes of understanding North Korea we find Krasner's early writing on patterns of incongruence between the state and its environment highly instructive and relevant, even if a little dated.

Korea between 1960 and 1979 under President Park Jeong-hui.<sup>9</sup>

The second plane of state-society interaction is utilitarian (Callaghy 1980, 470). It involves utilitarian “bargaining” between the ruler and different constituencies within society. Consensus is reached through deals struck over what each will undertake to do, and what will be the return on investments in time and resources. In an autocracy such as North Korea, the utilitarian plane is significant in terms of maintaining the cohesion of the elite ruling coalition. The so-called “Gift Politics” of Kim Jong-il is just one example of a vast patronage network, economically highly inefficient but maintained as a device to sustain utilitarian consensus (Green and Denney 2013, 97).

The final plane of consensus formation is coercive (Callaghy 1980, 484). Neither ruler nor ruled benefits from living under a consensus forged through coercion, as such a consensus is politically and financially costly to sustain, boiling down to the principle: “[d]o as I say or I may opt to punish you.” This type of domain consensus is premised on a climate of fear and uncertainty, where punishments are often arbitrary.

This paper focuses on the first (and, to a lesser extent, second) of these planes of domain consensus formation. This does not mean we deny the importance of coercion in the North Korean case. Quite the opposite. The number and importance of the various North Korean security services (Ministry of State Security, Ministry of People’s Security, Defense Security Command, etc.) evidence the point that monopoly over the employment of violence acts as the state’s ultimate security guarantee.

Rather, what we seek to examine is how the state, buttressed by the credible threat of enforcing its will through violence, implements information strategies based on coherent narratives of developmental and social transformation to extend its domain consensus and thus limit the oppositional requirement to employ coercive force. We do this by examining one of the major mechanisms through which the state communicates with the population: official state media.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Many authors have written about the political objectives (e.g., legitimacy) of Park’s economic growth policies. See, among others, Taehyun Kim and Chang Jae Baik’s chapter in Kim and Vogel’s edited volume on the Park Chung-hee era (2011, 58-84).

10. The state media is not the only communications channel between state and society in North Korea. It is also possible to trace the linkages between government policy and such varied forms as people’s unit meeting lectures, workplace lectures, and the pretexts given for arbitrary audits and searches, etc.

Every element of the North Korean media is state-controlled. Freedom of the press is non-existent and all productions are explicitly designed to achieve political purposes (Reporters without Borders 2014, 4). Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of news and documentary reporting. In a June 1964 statement to workers of Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Kim Jong-il (1992, 7-13) made this point clear, stating that the transmission department of KCNA's societal role is as follows: "To propagate the revolutionary ideology of Kim Il Sung (*Suryeong-nim*) to the four corners of the world while making known our party's stance." The heavy emphasis placed in North Korea in the past year on Kim Jong-il's propaganda guidance in the 1960s and 1970s indicates that the basic role of the media is not being fundamentally rethought (KCNA 2014a).

To the North Korean authorities, the state media is an outgrowth of government; it is a mediating lens, designed for the dissemination of the state's message or messages, otherwise defined as its information strategy or strategies, to the population and to the outside world (New Focus International 2013; University of North Korean Studies 2003, 74). Therefore, the subject of this paper is suited to analysis through state media sources.

## What Is an Information Strategy?

This paper defines an information strategy as a tactic employed by the state to harness the power of information to alter the state-society consensus. However, not every effort by the North Korean regime to manipulate information is *ipso facto* an information strategy. There are three conditions that must be met:

- i. The tactic must involve the use of state-directed or state-sanctioned actors; these actors are quintessential "cogs in the machine."
- ii. The message delivered by the state-directed actors must be intended largely for an internal/domestic audience. Messages explicitly intended for external audiences are worthy of investigation, but in this paper we are concerned with how the North Korean regime seeks to convince and control subjects residing within the territorial boundaries of the state, where the regime is the sovereign authority.
- iii. A clear political message must be discernable—specifically, this message

must be a deliberate attempt by the government to buttress, recover, or expand its domain consensus.

Our highly specific and descriptive study of North Korean state's internal information strategies in the Kim Jong-un era is executed with a two-fold objective in mind: 1) to further probe domain consensus as a generalizable theory through a single-case study—what Harry Eckstein (1975, 93) calls a “plausibility probe;” and 2) To enrich scholarly and policy circles' knowledge of North Korea in the Kim Jong-un era.

To do this we look at three information strategies: 1) Re-defector press conferences; 2) Sport; and 3) Music and the Moranbong Band. We argue that each plays a specific role in molding public sentiment toward the government of Kim Jong-un, by either downplaying an alternative mode of existence (e.g., life as a defector in South Korea) or enhancing the dominant public perception of North Korea as a progressive, changing, improving state.

## Re-defector Press Conferences

“Re-defectors” can be defined as North Korean citizens who defect to the Republic of Korea and then, having gone through a rigorous intelligence service interrogation, the Hanawon resettlement process and officially entered South Korean society, return to North Korea, usually via China and the Tumen River frontier (Harlan 2012; Park 2013; Cathcart & Gleason 2013). In recent years, [North] Korean Central Television has broadcast a steady stream of press conferences featuring “re-defectors,” all of which have been covered by KCNA.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 2013 there had been eight such conferences featuring 25 defectors. Seven involved persons described as North Korean defectors from South Korea, and, with the exception of a group of teenagers forcefully repatriated from Laos via China and one espionage case, all were said to have

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11. Many of the quotations used from the re-defector press conferences were obtained using the official KCNA source (in English). We also compared what was reported by KCNA to the videos of the actual conferences, obtained via an Internet source (e.g., YouTube) or from South Korean media. See References for links.



returned under their own volition in order to resettle in North Korea.

The identity of these re-defectors is keenly contested. There are those who presume they are spies returning to North Korea at the instruction of the Korean Workers' Party to provide a false endorsement of the society being built around Kim Jong-un (Lee 2013). Or, worse yet, there are claims that some may have been physically captured by North Korean state intelligence operatives and forced to go before the camera (Park 2013). On the other hand, others accept at face value the idea that they are genuine defectors who have opted to return to North Korea to escape the poverty and sense of discrimination felt by many North Korean escapees who attempt to settle in South Korea (Sunwoo 2014).

This latter assumption stems from a general acknowledgement that South Korea is a fiercely competitive society, one in which ethnic ties alone are not sufficient for successful assimilation, and where defectors have a much lower probability of becoming affluent than their South Korean counterparts.<sup>12</sup> It is also true that conditions in North Korea have somewhat stabilized since the 1990s (when a devastating famine hit North Korea), thus plausibly incentivizing defectors to return home. In particular, the expansion of small-scale “market places” (*jangmadang*) has improved conditions for ordinary North Koreans in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Although not new (Kim Il-sung acknowledged the presence of small markets in 1969), buying and selling at the market places has become an ordinary activity; in post-famine North Korea people rely on markets to both make money and buy basic goods (Ward 2014a, 2014b).

Clearly, a difference exists between the North Korean state using the return of one of its espionage agents in the South to fabricate a propaganda narrative on the one hand, and, on the other, the formation of that same narrative around a returnee whose departure into or return from South Korean society was not engineered by the regime in Pyongyang. Consequently, we use the phrases “re-defection” and “re-defector” as shorthand, neither accepting nor discounting the possibility that those we label “re-defectors” may actually be nothing of the

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12. According to the Korea Hana Foundation (formerly North Korea Refugees' Foundation), which conducts annual surveys into the economic activities of defectors living in South Korea, the average incomes of defectors lie well below the national average. They also work longer hours than their South Korean counterparts, and the unemployment rate for defectors is nearly 10%. All data from the 2013 annual survey (Ju 2014).

sort. We do so for one simple reason: the goal and outcome of re-defection is identical no matter the true identity of the re-defectors involved. Our focus is only on the idea that re-defection is an important element in the maintenance of domain consensus.

When investigating the narratives of the re-defector press conferences, what is said and why it is said is as important, or perhaps more important, than who is saying it. After all, in a North Korean television broadcast, one can only assume that all messages delivered are either carefully edited or completely scripted, and that they are being broadcasted primarily for the domestic consumption of the citizens of the DPRK. While the narratives are ostensibly personal, we have to look beyond the suspected manipulation of the information for the narratives that drive toward the state's purpose of establishing its domain. As outlined under the scope conditions above, we define an information strategy as a message delivered by a state-sanctioned actor to a domestic/internal audience. Although external viewing of North Korean television in general, and the re-defector conferences specifically, is both possible and common,<sup>13</sup> we believe the goal of re-defector press conferences described below is to guide public opinion of defection *within* North Korea.

The defection experience through China and its northeast is depicted as a hellscape full of South Korean intelligence agents, dishonest brokers of human flesh, and cunning Christian missionaries, turning North Korea by contrast into a calmly functional socialist utopia. Although there is some variation between each press conference (the coverage of nine teenagers returned from the PRC-Laos border region being the notable exception), the basic message is clear and consistent: innocent and otherwise loyal citizens of North Korea were either lured or “dragged” into defecting to South Korea, where they eked out a pauper-like existence. Contrary to the rosy image of life as depicted in South Korean dramas (which are viewed by roughly half of North Koreans; Green 2014), defectors residing in the South are unable to make ends meet in a Machiavellian capitalist system; they are confronted with trickery and discrimination, living

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13. Organs and affiliates of the North Korean state apparatus regularly upload media to YouTube, including recordings of North Korean state television. Foreign media, specifically South Korean media, records North Korean Central Television for analysis and public reporting.

like low-class bottom-feeders vis-à-vis wealthier South Koreans. What is more, the message conveyed via the re-defector press conferences is that return defectors will *not* be punished; as victims of deception and subterfuge, their crimes of defection can be forgiven by virtue of Kim Jong-un's "deep affection and generosity." Of course, rather than reporting genuine acts of benevolence, this narrative ought to be read as part of North Korea's evolving information strategy. It is a deliberate effort to harness the power of information for the purpose of maintaining normative domain consensus.

Until 2012, Yu Dae-jun's return to North Korea in 2000 had been the only publicized re-defection. At the press conference hosted for Yu upon his return, he stressed the difficulties faced by defectors living in South Korea and the benevolence of Kim Jong-il (*New York Times* 2002). These two themes—class division and benevolence of the North Korean leader—are again being played up by North Korean state as a part of a new information strategy in the Kim Jong-un era. With an increase in the number of re-defections, the state has taken advantage of the opportunity to exaggerate the difficulties faced by defectors who choose to start a new life in South Korea and to further venerate the Supreme Leader in an effort to shore up the legitimacy of the state.

North Korea's use of re-defectors as part of an information strategy started in 2012 with the return of four defectors. In May, 67-year-old Pak Jeong-suk (known in South Korea as Park In-suk) returned to North Korea and on June 28 spoke at a news conference hosted at the People's Palace of Culture in Pyongyang. In front of Korean and foreign reporters, Park claims she was "taken in by the luring tactics of south Korean Intelligence Service agents" after deciding to seek out her father, who had went to South Korean during the Korean War. The story she told, recounted by KCNA, is instructive:

Referring to the living conditions of the "defectors from the north," [Pak] said the jobs they could find at best were nothing but waste cleaning, vessel washing and servicing and other most hateful and difficult jobs.

The suicide [sic] rate among them is five times that among other South Koreans, she said. They ardently wish to return to the DPRK, cursing corrupt South Korean society and reproaching themselves.

But, rather than made an example of and punished, like others who chose to

defect and were later repatriated,<sup>14</sup> Pak is forgiven her transgression (KCNA 2012a). Or so it is told:

The dear respected Kim Jong Un did not blame me who did so many wrongs in the past but brought me under his warm care. He showed profound loving care for me.

A second re-defector press conference, which took place on November 8,<sup>15</sup> showed Kim Kwang-hyeok and Go Jeong-nam, together with their child, Sehan, on Korean Central Television at the People's Palace. The message, like the venue, was much the same: the couple was there to tell stories and field "questions" from reporters about defecting and the difficulties of living in the capitalist South. Both Kim and Go lamented the day they left the motherland. The couple alleged they were "taken to South Korea in September 2008 after being tempted by [a broker] who, bearing a grudge against the social system in the DPRK, lured northerners to illegally cross the border." Playing up the class-divide between defectors living in South Korea and ordinary South Koreans, Kim claimed that "defectors from the north cannot [sic] find a foothold in South Korea and they are snubbed and disdained everywhere.... Kind human feelings could not be found... in unjust and unequal South Korean society." Go, with her son by her side, told the audience that children of defectors face systematic discrimination: "[s]ome hopeless children burn coal and wait for their deaths," she recounted, "finding it too painful to live, exposed to contempt" (KCNA 2012d).

In the third defection in the Kim Jong-un era, and the first of 2013, Kim

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14. Punishment of repatriated defectors is a hotly contested political issue and the center of a contentious regional debate regarding the legal status of defectors. It regularly serves as a wedge issue between China (who classifies defectors as "fugitives" and repatriates those caught on Chinese soil) and other countries (e.g., South Korea and the United States) who consider defectors "refugees" (Choe 2012).

15. In July 2012, a second potential re-defector, Jeon Yeong-cheol, is also reported to have appeared at a press conference. His case, however, is excluded due to confounding circumstances. It is alleged that North Korean security forces arrested Chon after either: 1) conspiring to destroy of a statue of Kim Il-sung (the North Korean version of the story); or 2) selling methamphetamines in the border region (a second, competing claim) (Cho 2012). As told in the post-conference KCNA article, his crime was not simply defecting. He was conspiring to commit an act of treason. What he was *actually* doing is hard to say (KCNA 2012b).

Gwang-ho, Go Gyeong-hui, and Kim Ok-sil gave testimonies that reinforced the same themes introduced in 2012: “South Korea is a cold, hard place, and it takes only a short time to realize that North Korea, under the warm embrace of the Supreme Leader, is a better place to live.” On top of emphasizing class-divides and Kim Jong-un’s willingness to forgive defectors, the conference also introduces the notion that going to China to make money, though certainly not a good idea, is better than going to South Korea. Go claimed that she only left North Korea “because I was told I can make money in China. My intention was not to go to South Korea.” China as a place to make money (but not live) is a reoccurring theme in the re-defector press conferences. Both re-defectors also said that they were “unpunished and leniently treated instead of being punish on their return...” (KCNA 2013a).

The third re-defector press conference of 2013 saw a change in venue and a new theme: family honor. In what is described by KCNA as a “round-table” at the Goryo Hall of Compatriots, Lee Hyeok-cheol, sitting between re-defectors Gang Gyeong-suk and Kim Kyeong-ok, told a story of family betrayal that parallels the well-known Chosun-era children’s tale “Huengbu and Nolbu.”<sup>16</sup> According to his testimony, Lee was enticed by his wealthy brother (an owner of many cars) to join him in South Korea, only to be utterly betrayed upon arrival. Left to sleep in a church dormitory after passing through the interrogation center, rather than help his younger brother (a dictum of Confucian family hierarchy), the greedy older brother demands part of Lee’s resettlement money provided by the South Korean government.<sup>17</sup> As in the other cases, Lee returns home, where the benevolent Kim Jong-un awards him the chance to start his life anew. Even though Lee was known as a repeat defector said to have been back and forth no fewer than four times (Kim 2013), the narrative remained

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16. This is a tale about two brothers, Heungbu and Nolbu, and the importance of filial piety and Confucian family hierarchy. Nolbu, the older brother, is cruel and greedy. After the death of their parents, he kicks Heungbu and his family out of the house and hoards all the family assets to himself. Though the younger brother struggles at first, it is ultimately the older brother who finds himself suffering, having fallen victim to his own greed. Heungbu, being the nobler of the two, eventually takes Nolbu into his own home. The same symbolism is found in Lee’s story.

17. After screening by security agencies, North Koreans are provided with settlement preparation, residence support, and a Minimum Living Standard allowance, amongst other things (Ministry of Unification 2014b).

the same: come home and be pardoned (KCNA 2013b).

The return of the “Laos Nine” in early May 2013 can be seen as a test of the regime’s commitment to “forgiving” defectors. According to sources inside the country (Kang 2014), the young defectors were not punished upon returning, but were simply sent home—but not before making a public appearance. In another “round-table” at the Goryo Hall of Compatriots, the teenagers (aged 14-18) talked of being victims to human trafficking by a Christian pastor and his wife, defined in North Korean lingo as a “South Korean puppet group.” According to the state-sanctioned testimony, the nine teenagers were “abductees to South Korea by flesh traffickers and rendered help so that they could be sent back to Pyongyang.” Once home, the teenagers sang “Ardent Desire” as a tribute to Kim Jong-un, who had opened “a bright future for them” (KCNA 2013c).

On September 30, 2013, re-defectors Pak Jin-geun and Jang Kwang-cheol discussed in another round-table setting how they were both “deceived by the intrigues of the puppet group.” Pak claimed he was taken away to south Korea... caught in the tentacles of the Intelligence Service while roaming about in China after trespassing on the border with it in quest of money.” Jang, on the other hand, said he “was taken to South Korea in March [2012], fooled by the tricks of brokers tied with the Intelligence Service” (KCNA 2013d). According to other sources, Pak spoke on the conditions for North Korean defectors living in the South, giving priority to the wedge issue of class-division. “People like us have no money and cannot obtain work [in South Korea],” she said, “so there is no possible way to make ends meet.” And, so as to reinforce the policy of “forgiveness,” Pak, with reference to the treatment of the “Laos Nine,” emphasized that “[i]nstead of blaming you for taking the path of treason, the motherland will engage you in a warm embrace and take care of you. Your past of crime will be erased” (Jin 2013). While it is true that making reference to the treatment of previous re-defectors indicates that the message could be intended for an external audience, we believe that the message, delivered first through state TV, is still intended primarily for a domestic audience. If anything, the notion that re-defectors can return unpunished is intended for the families of defectors still residing in North Korea; these families typically maintain strong links with defector family members (Seol 2014).

On December 20, 2013, the date of the most recent re-defector press conference, an elderly woman by the name of Choe Gye-sun appeared on state television with her sister, Pak Jeong-sik. Playing on the well-established

themes of forceful abduction and poor treatment in South Korea, Choi claimed that while looking for her sister in China in December 2011, South Korean agents kidnapped her and took her to the South. During her time in there, Choi claimed she was treated as “subhuman” from the moment she arrived. But, upon returning home, she has enjoyed a good life, living with her son and daughter-in-law in the Daedong district of Pyongyang (KCNA 2013e).<sup>18</sup>

Analyses of the press conferences themselves show how re-defector press conferences are being strategically exploited as part of a North Korean information strategy, the objective of which is to maintain domain consensus. Using media as a vehicle of communication with society, the state instrumentalizes cases of re-defection to exaggerate the class-divide in South Korea between wealthy South Koreans and lower-class North Koreans. Further, this narrative also conveys the notion that defection is no longer the crime it once was. Although North Korean public policy is inconsistent, it seems as if this narrative-cum policy line is to some extent being followed.

## Sports and Physical Education

Prior to Kim Jong-un’s first public appearance on September 28, 2010 (North Korea Leadership Watch 2010), the introduction of the country’s would-be leader to the public took place through indirect, but unmistakable, euphemistic reference. Just as Kim Jong-il was known publicly as the “Party Center” in the 1970s when he was building his dominance over the political system and shifting power away from his father, Kim Il-sung, and uncle, Kim Yong-ju, so Kim Jong-un was not publicly named (Hyeon 2007).

Instead, there was the song “Footsteps,” the earliest public manifestation of Kim in propaganda, with its vague refrain of “our General’s footsteps” (*StimmeKoreas* 2012), and widespread use of concepts presumed to indicate modernity and vitality, such as “CNC (Computer Numerical Control).” The primary result of these actions was the creation of a sense of youthful energy around the leader, which put forward

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18. Living in the capital city of Pyongyang (or the idea of someone living in Pyongyang) is significant. Of North Korea’s some 25 million inhabitants, the 3.2 million living in Pyongyang have significantly better lives than those outside of the capital city (*The Economist* 2013).

and promoted reasons why the North Korean public should embrace the rule of a very young man (*Chosun Ilbo* 2010; Lee 2014, 63).

Yet among the tropes of youthful modernity that were employed to this end, there was no reference to sport. For instance, the song “Footsteps” did not make reference to sport at all (*StimmeKoreas* 2012); likewise, neither did an extended January 2012 propaganda film, the first to assert Kim Jong-un’s overall greatness (Coppola 2012).

This state of affairs changed dramatically on August 16, 2012, when a parade took place from Sunan International Airport through the streets of Pyongyang (*StimmeKoreas* 2014; *Daily NK* 2012). Citizens of the capital had come out to celebrate the return of the North Korean Olympic team following unanticipated levels of success at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Despite sending a group of just 51 athletes to compete in less than half of the 36 sports available in London, North Koreans came home with four gold and two bronze medals (Olympic.org 2014).

Early in the Games, Korean Central Television recognized the growing success of the North Korean team, and expanded coverage of the sporting events dramatically. Whereas viewing had previously been limited to 15 minutes of highlights at the end of daily news bulletins at 8 pm—this in spite of the fact that the country had reached a last-minute deal to broadcast up to 200 hours of coverage of its choice—by the time the North Korean team secured its fourth gold medal, television viewers were receiving five hours of Olympic coverage per day (Ramstad 2012; Mok 2012).

It is almost certain that the state’s skilled public relations officials had singled out sport as a possible tool by which to cultivate the public image of Kim Jong-un early in the process of his elevation following the stroke Kim Jong-il suffered in August 2008 (*The Telegraph* 2011). Most obviously, sports-related construction projects must have already been planned at the time of, or more likely prior to, the London Olympics, which began on July 27, 2012, otherwise they would not have been completed in time to serve their purpose. Unfortunately, without access to North Korean state archives it is impossible to establish the precise history of this decision-making process.<sup>19</sup> What is possible, however, is

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19. Forthcoming research by Christopher Green and Hwang Ju-hui deals with the importance of sport as an information strategy in terms of its day-to-day impact on ordinary lives, specifically in schools and workplaces. This paper only deals with readily visible external outcomes and characteristics.



to demonstrate clearly the way in which North Korean successes on the tatami mat and in the weightlifting arena in London were followed by a rapid rise in state focus on sport. Sport quickly became a key information strategy of the Kim Jong-un regime, used to propagate the notion of a state growing in stature and engaging with other states on a level playing field.

Sport was elevated within the political structure on November 4, 2012, when a full meeting of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, the first since June the previous year, convened to approve the formation of an entity called the State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission. The Commission's role, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA 2012c), was "increasing social concern for physical culture and sports, putting it on a mass basis, making it part of daily life, putting sports science and technology on a world level and training sports persons on a long-term basis, improving the training of players and national teams training for international games, vitalizing domestic sport and ensuring the delivery of material supplies to sport."

On two further occasions in November the front page of *Rodong Sinmun*, the daily publication of the Korean Workers' Party, was dominated by coverage of Kim Jong-un visiting a sport-related construction project or event: the completion of an open-air ice rink and roller skating rink on November 4 (*Rodong Sinmun* 2012a), and a shooting and women's volleyball match on November 8 (*Rodong Sinmun* 2012b). On December 9 an article referred to the Central Information and Communications Bureau as "a workplace that has great pride in popularizing physical activity and making it habitual" (*Rodong Sinmun* 2012c). As is the case in all major North Korean media articles, the piece began with a quote from one of the Kim family, in this case Kim Jong-un, stating, "[t]he popularization of physical activity can only be achieved in a socialist society, in which the people are the sole owner of the country, and everything concerns the promotion of the welfare of workers."

The rising tenor of sports propaganda, and its explicit connection to Kim Jong-un, continued in 2013. Analysis of archival copies of *Rodong Sinmun* held in Seoul shows a rising number of articles that either concern sport directly, or use a backdrop of sport to illustrate another element in the state's information strategy. 37 articles fell into this category in November 2012, followed by 24 in both December and January. February 2013 saw the lowest monthly total, 17, but the number rose once again in the spring and summer months: 28 (March),

40 (April), 46 (May), 57 (June), 45 (July), and 80 (August). Autumn saw even higher numbers recorded: 80 in September, and no fewer than 97 articles in October.

Finally, 49 (November) and 27 (December) in 2013 provide strong evidence of rising levels of sports propaganda. The two months show 32% and 12.5% rises above the corresponding total number of articles from the year before.

A look back at data from a previous era, 1983, when Kim Il-sung was in power, is similarly instructive. In both February and October 1983, corresponding to the peak and trough months in the 2012-13 data set, just three articles on sporting topics were published in *Rodong Sinmun* during the entire month, and not one of these was explicitly linked to Kim Il-sung, much less the legitimacy of his rule. Instead, the articles were short, and largely concerned with the departure or arrival of teams to international competitions. This not only illustrates the scale of the increase in sporting media production in the Kim Jong-un era, but also shows that under Kim Il-sung there was limited political value ascribed to sport overall. Simply, no part of Kim Il-sung's public image concerned sport, sporting production, or sporting success.

Moving away from production statistics and back to focus on specific examples, we find that a significant proportion of the rapidly rising volume of stories concerning sport was published on the front page of *Rodong Sinmun*; 25 front-page articles in the calendar year involved the direct attendance or guidance of Kim Jong-un in sporting events. This makes these 25 articles more important than other stories in terms of the state's information strategy, since the presence of the Supreme Leader at an event is a strong signaling strategy indicating relative importance (University of North Korean Studies 2003, 76).

There were four such front-page headline stories in March, when former superstar American basketball player Dennis Rodman made his well-publicized first trip to North Korea (*Rodong Sinmun* 2013a), and female marathon runner Gim Geum-ok received a ticker tape parade through the nation's capital following her victory at the 14<sup>th</sup> Asian Marathon Championships in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Amateur Athletic Association 2013; *Rodong Sinmun* 2013b). There were a further two in April, most notably when Kim Jong-un attended a volleyball match upon the occasion of the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung (April 15<sup>th</sup>) (*Rodong Sinmun* 2013c). Another two followed in June, including news of Kim's trip to Pyongyang International

Football School and Reungna People's Sports Park (*Rodong Sinmun* 2013d) and a review of the sports facilities on offer at Ganggye Tractor Factory in Ganggye, Jagang Province (*Rodong Sinmun* 2013e). No fewer than five were published in August, most notably the victory of the North Korean women's football team at the East Asian Cup on August 1 (*Rodong Sinmun* 2013f) and Kim's visits to two under-construction facilities on August 10: Mirim Riding Club and Munsu Water Park, both in Pyongyang (*Rodong Sinmun* 2013g).

Finally, in the opening months of 2014, one finds no let-up in sporting focus. The state moved to rhetorically prioritize sport and physical education within budgetary expenditure at the 1<sup>st</sup> session of the 13<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) on April 9, stipulating a 17.1% increase for the sector, far above any other sector or ministry. This may be little more than a rhetorical flourish given the prevalence of unfunded mandates in the North Korean political structure; nevertheless, the political intent behind announcing such a budget increase is clear.

A KCNA (2014b) report on the matter stated:

The state budgetary expenditure is expected to increase 6.5% over last year. Out of this, spending for the fields of agriculture, stockbreeding and fishery is expected to go up 5.1%, that for capital construction 4.3%, that for science and technology 3.6%, that for the vanguard sector of the national economy and the fields of basic industry and light industry 5.2%, that for education 5.6%, that for healthcare 2.2%, that for social insurance and social security 1.4%, that for sports 17.1% and that for culture 1.3%.

Delivering the Cabinet Premier's speech at the same SPA session, Pak Pong-ju also asserted that his Cabinet planned to "further spur the construction of civilized socialist country" through the "creation of our-style socialist culture" (explicitly including sport). In its regular monthly report on Kim Jong-un's activities at this time, the South Korean Ministry of Unification (2014c) observed that in the period:

[Sport] matches were organized frequently and [Kim Jong-un said] that the development of societal interest in sport is important. [Kim Jong-un] outlined tasks in the groundbreaking development of the nation's sport, and these became guidelines.

Finally, on April 14, *Rodong Sinmun* carried an open statement from the Secretariat of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) purporting to express anger at specific media organizations in South Korea who, it alleged, sought to misrepresent the state's dedication to sport. Though the English translation of the article omits this, Jo Gab-je (2014) notes, citing *Daily NK*:

Conservative media and their followers are slandering us, saying that our sports-centered policy and passion for sport have “the aim of using sport to dissipate the people’s discontent and interest, and inject energy into its depressed social atmosphere.”

## Music and the Moranbong Band

The first two years of Kim Jong-un's formal ascendancy as supreme leader coincided with a wave of spending on prestige projects in Pyongyang. These projects were intended to shift foreign perceptions of North Korea and hammer home to domestic audiences that living standards were on the rise (Frank 2013). All of these changes were imputed to Kim Jong-un's influence, which the state was quick to depict as total.

North Korean state media has persistently pushed the idea that Kim Jong-un's reign, following absolutely the outlines of Kim Jong-il's wishes, has brought a level of material prosperity that is worth supporting and celebrating (Habib 2012). For this reason, “re-defectors” to North Korea are eager to claim that Kim Jong-un's care and the material comforts of life in Pyongyang helped to bring them home. The massive investment at a major symbol of the regime's fixation with sports—the Masik Pass ski resort—is posited as both as a celebration of North Korean prosperity shared with the common people, and as the fundament of a tourist economy that will provide yet more riches (Talmadge 2013).

The use of the musical arts to support these ideas should perhaps not be so much of a surprise. The idea of “musical politics,” or radically increasing the amount of music in society and further focusing its ideological content, was brought to the fore to great effect in the Kim Jong-il system, where the leader laid down much groundwork. While the partial openness of the Kim Jong-un era—as seen in the fashions and songs of new musical groups—can be ascribed

to the change of leader, we cannot simply therefore argue that his youth, his overseas study experience, and his experience of Western culture are somehow in and of themselves responsible for the new fashions. It is important to recognize that changes over time are also a reflection of changes in North Korean society, and that occasionally the state has to move to catch up with popular tastes.

In the realm of musical culture in North Korea, Kim Jong-un's message of rising living standards has been expressed in perhaps the most explicit terms. This section of the paper will argue that the Moranbong Band has served as the preeminent symbol for the North Korean state's drive to maintain its relevance for youth and elites in Pyongyang who might otherwise be disposed to look South. Thus, while North Korea, to be sure, engages in an actively defined program of paranoia about and suppression of outside information, it is also important to note that suppression is but one side of the coin: North Korea is also engaging in an active program of updated cultural production that is intended to absorb new idioms and transmute or turn them to the advantage of the revolution.

The all-female Moranbong Band, which is made up of amplified electronic instruments and over half a dozen singers, made its debut in July 2012, concurrent to the first public appearance of Kim Jong-un's wife, Lee Seol-ju. Because the initial performance included images of Western popular culture icons like Disney characters and one major reference to a Hollywood movie, the show attracted a great deal of external attention.

The media rollout for North Korea's erstwhile First Lady was a kind of success for Kim Jong-un. The preparation of the discourse and its pacing by North Korean media shows a good understanding of how the Western reception would go. The combination of an unexpected brief flash of Westernization along with an unexpected flash of transparency (a Kim dictator publicly acknowledging a spouse) was enough for North Korea to reap the gains without having to make any substantive promises to its own people about changes in the system.

This largely worked in terms of foreign public opinion. As one analyst wrote:

For a 20-something supreme leader, Kim's feel for...symbolism seems unusually shrewd—and seductive to Westerners. He allowed women to wear pants at public events. In the company of the smartly dressed woman we now know to be his wife, he enjoyed a live Mickey Mouse performance

and gave a thumbs-up to a concert rendition of the theme from “Rocky.” This clearly calculated narrative has performed public relations magic. (Harden, 2012; Green 2012)

Even if, by chance, a North Korean audience knew that the choice of repertoire for the band at its debut (most famously, the theme song to the American film “Rocky,” starring Sylvester Stallone, whose image was displayed at the performance) could be explained away as a paean to undersized underdogs everywhere. Meanwhile, the anti-reformist statements that followed—and the Moranbong Band’s next appearance at a Korean War commemoration—made clear that this was not some broader *glasnost* move by Kim Jong-un (Foster-Carter, 2012). Primarily, the state created the Moranbong Band to perform in regular televised spectacles akin to rock music shows in front of indoor stadium audiences, intimating that the Kim regime had a more materially prosperous (and potentially culturally liberal) future in store.

Kim Jong-un clearly wants to create a durable power structure that both enhances nationalistic feelings and bolsters the idea that life in North Korea is in fact sustainable. As such, members of society under the age of 35 are the most important consumers of nationalism and political lines that promote some version of renewal and positive change. Thus, apart from recent staging of propaganda victories for returned defectors and departing and trussed ROK dissidents, North Korea has been busy painting a picture of Kim Jong-un’s leadership, bound up with new songs, new propaganda forms, and what—at first glance—appeared to be a new cultural turn.

The Moranbong Band quickly became a key symbol for North Korean youth of a limited cultural opening that ought to accompany rising prosperity. But it took a long hiatus after rumors erupted in August 2013 of a purge of Pyongyang’s relatively small classical music scene. At its concert that finally broke its long absence, the group was paired with the heavily orthodox voices and hands of the State Merited Orchestra and Chorus, a group that would not have been out of place in the Soviet Union under the “High Stalinism” of the early 1950s (KCNA 2013f).

The Moranbong Band has been a key driver in the promotion of new theme songs associated with Kim Jong-un, most of which asserted the successor’s association with conventional, military-first themes. Official North Korean music videos of the same songs drive along with such graphic motifs as

torpedoes being shot into the water—an exact visual reprise of the ship-sinking motif associated with Kim Jong-un in his debut film in January 2012. Printing full songs in notation on its front page, *Rodong Sinmun* signaled that the whole North Korean people, foremost members of the Korean People’s Army, were required to learn the new tune and words straight away. The song’s construction indicated that rapid change is coming, and things may end very differently than where they began. This message is embedded in the harmonic progression: the song ends in a rather different key than it begins in, using an unstable harmony which is a rather rare formal occurrence in North Korean song literature (Cathcart 2008).

If state propaganda is to be believed, the Moranbong Band’s first performance was also meant to stimulate production in the textile sector, an important node of which Kim Jong-un and his female companion had visited the day before the ensemble’s premiere in Pyongyang. Cultural production therefore remains tethered to state-sponsored dreams of material production; the Moranbong performance was also, in a sense, about the promise of improved living standards.

It is surely possible to interpret the Moranbong Band performance as a kind of promise to the women of Pyongyang and perhaps North Korean society more broadly that a kind of material prosperity is around the corner, and that self-expression along the lines of jewelry, short skirts, and high-heels is considered acceptable. Changes in fashion are surely underfoot in the DPRK, and have been for some time. “Strapless dresses,” wrote Isaac Stone Fish (2012) in an earlier analysis, are “rare for the capital of a very conservative country where women cover their shoulders.” While thus far in the Kim Jong-un era, the need for policing of fashions and hairstyles seems increasingly irrelevant to the grammar of revolutionary etiquette in the cities.

However, none of this presupposes some sudden reluctance of the regime to pull back the slack already granted to city dwellers. With respect to the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League, Kim Jong-un—quite uniquely after his father’s death—shuffled the leadership and has made stringent efforts to tether allegiance. Part of what the state’s Moranbong Band and high-tech efforts are about is simply an effort to get out ahead of youth trends and corral the current generation.

The adjustments made by the state, however, raise a relevant question: Is it possible to open up fashion norms in the name of solidifying a domain consensus but creating new problems? The state has tried to justify new clothing

liberalization by hearkening back to supposed fashion styles of the Goguryeo kingdom to make the fashion desires of North Korean women become a product of patriotism rather than “flunkeyism.” The fact that an apparently harmless policy (would the wearing of earrings really represent some counter-revolutionary tipping point?) needs to be cloaked in the practices of an ancient kingdom from the fourth century shows the lengths to which the regime will go to justify its own uniqueness, when in fact the personal practices of North Korean women indicate the opposite.

Kim Jong-un has neglected to appear with his father’s vinalon jacket in favor of the Mao suit: and state media has ceased reference to his desire to emulate his father’s post-stroke fashion (winter jacket and fur hat, gloves at all times). The vinalon jumpsuit will stay firmly on the statue and will not be worn by the Respected General. Whether or not North Korean women will be able to follow in his heavy “footsteps” and continue going their own way with clothing choices remains an unsettled question.

## Conclusion

As the three cases in this paper amply demonstrate, North Korea’s information strategy in the Kim Jong-un era has put forward an updated “domain consensus,” or reciprocity of expectations, between the state and its people. Since December 2011, the North Korean state has seemingly recognized the need to prevent, refute, co-opt, and manipulate a burgeoning array of information spreading in society, and its responses include narratives of “re-defection,” sporting strength, and the youthful musical culture of the Moranbong Band.

The information strategy involved incorporates an interrelated set of broad underlying themes. First, as asserted most forcefully by the spate of re-defector press conferences in the Kim era, there is the bold claim that life is better in North Korea than in South Korea. This assertion is premised upon a rising level of aggregate knowledge about South Korea among North Korean citizens—it is impossible to keep all outside information out. Second, it indicates that a second underlying theme is being transmitted; namely, that the Kim Jong-un regime is a responsive one that is determined to attend to the livelihoods of its people. As such, it is not even desirable to try and leave.

Most of all, all three cases appear designed to evidence a third, vital theme:



that the country is truly on an upward trajectory. There is demonstrably no appetite in the ruling circles in Pyongyang for loosening the state's coercive grip on society; this reality remains manifestly visible in both the political terror and violence visited upon Jang Song-taek and the reality of life along the Sino-North Korean border since his execution. However, by propagating the notion that defectors in South Korea are disillusioned, and thus keen to return to North Korea and resume their old lives, that the country is pushing forward into a brave new world of sporting prowess in both summer and winter, and that the native musical culture is as diverse and attractive as anything available on a smuggled MP3, the state undermines possible areas of discontent, co-opts and/or contains the threat posed by outside information, and negotiates a viable domain consensus.

What this research and these case studies advance is the notion that the North Korean government is anything but unaware of the challenges to its information supremacy, and is, in fact, very active in counteracting and preempting damage from external information. The state thus asserts its control not just over bodies, but the very narrative of the state's effective purpose, and sensitively reacts to changes in its external task environment. It remains hard to measure reception of that message inside the country, but tracing the modulations of the message itself indicates the determination of the regime to forge a domain consensus, and thus sustain its rule long into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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\* Links to videos clips of the re-defector press conferences during the Kim Jong-un era are listed below, starting with the first conference in 2012. Where full-length videos could not be found, the videos obtained by South Korean media for reporting purposes were used instead.

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## Abstract

The North Korean government of Kim Jong-un is experiencing multiple simultaneous challenges to its legitimacy, but few could be more serious than the inflow and circulation of information in society. This paper uses three case studies to specifically examine how the North Korean state is responding to this danger by actively projecting narratives of transformation: “re-defectors,” sports, and Kim Jong-un’s court orchestra, the Moranbong Band. In every case, it becomes clear that the state is employing an active strategy, not only responding to negative external portrayals, but also trying to shape its own image both within and without its borders. In order to understand how the state interacts with the North Korean public, this paper employs Thomas Callaghy’s trifurcated “domain consensus” as a framework by which to sub-categorize Pyongyang’s approach: normative, utilitarian, and coercive. It focuses on the first of these types of consensus formation, the normative, by exploring the information strategies used by the Kim Jong-un government as it seeks to promote a revised Weberian “reciprocity of expectations” with the population.

**Keywords:** state-society relations, re-defectors, information strategies, sport, Moranbong Band