Assessing Propaganda Effectiveness in North Korea: A Limited Access Case Study

Efe Sevin, Kadir Jun Ayhan, Won Yong Jang, and Hyelim Lee

INTRODUCTION

The Korean Peninsula has been an area of interest for propaganda scholars. Given the almost mystified portrayal of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and its relatively closed-off status, scholars have produced a significant volume of studies analyzing the country's propaganda toward its citizens (Byman & Lind, 2010) and its portrayal of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) (Gabroussenko, 2011), as well as of the Western world (Oh & Hassig, 2010). In this chapter, our objective is to use the experience in the Peninsula from a methodological perspective to advance our understanding of propaganda assessment. More specifically, we present a case study of how South Korean practitioners assess their campaigns.

The South Korean experience is noteworthy and has the potential to contribute to propaganda studies based on the context in which it is taking place. Primarily, the fact that North Korea is inaccessible through mass media or digital communication platforms encourages the propagandists to take more creative solutions. From leaflets carried by balloons across the borders and loudspeakers targeting the North, we observe projects that present non-mainstream approaches to reach an audience. This figurative communication distance between the audiences and practitioners requires a similarly creative approach to assessment. Practitioners cannot rely on tried-and-true methods, such as public opinion polls, to assess the effectiveness of their campaigns. Our study is, thus, led by an overarching question: *How do practitioners assess their impact in environments with limited access?*

We present a case study of the South Korean propaganda experience toward the North. We build the case narrative on document analysis, interviews with key practitioners, and an impressionistic survey carried out among the defectors from North Korea. We limit our study to non-state actors in South

Korea that actively engage in propaganda attempts in, or rather, toward North Korea. While the government had been the main propagandist toward North Korea until the first inter-Korean summit in 2000, state-led propaganda activities came to a halt, except for a brief and lighter continuation in 2010s. Viewing these activities effective and necessary, North Korean defector entrepreneurs entered the propaganda scene to fill the vacuum created by the government's exit. Our study selected these non-state activists who have engaged in propaganda activities toward North Korea for more than a decade.

The rest of the chapter is structured in six parts. First, we present a summary of existing studies in propaganda assessment with a specific focus on cases including relatively closed regimes such as Cuba and Iran. Second, we introduce the historical context in which North-South relations as well as propaganda projects have been executed. Third, we discuss our case study methodology. Fourth, we share the reconstructed case narrative in the following section. Fifth, we discuss our findings from a theoretical perspective. Sixth, we conclude the chapter by sharing the implications of our study.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Effectiveness of Propaganda

A broad definition of propaganda, as provided by Harold D. Lasswell (1927, p. 627) in his seminal work *The Theory of Political Propaganda*, equates the term to all techniques that manage the 'collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols'. More nuanced definitions add methods and objectives, positioning propaganda as deliberate and systematic attempts that have the objective to 'achieve a response that further the desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006, p. 181). As both

definitions highlight, there has always been an interest in capturing the impacts and outcomes of propaganda effects. The earlier days of propaganda studies, shortly after World War I, were dominated by rhetorical approaches (Sproule, 1987). Scholars focused on analyzing the use of language and persuasive elements in messages (Billig, 1988). Contemporary studies have evolved toward communication research, including statistical and experimental research (Sproule, 1987). This particular move brought together a more quantitative approach to the assessment component (Watson, 2012) where studies incorporated assessment of outcomes. There is an expectation, both in the practice and study of propaganda, that the projects will yield observable and measurable changes (Parry-Giles, 1994).

The dissemination of propaganda messages has the potential to change the way issues are framed in mass media. Framing theory argues that communicators strive to make certain aspects of issues more salient in public discussions to achieve their intended consequences (Entman, 1993). For instance, during the Iraq War of 2003, the Bush administration framed the operation as self-defense (Hiebert, 2003), with the expectation that a self-defense use of armed forces would have been more acceptable than a war of aggression for the international community. More often than not, the issues at hand can be presented through multiple frames. While explaining the recent developments in China, two American newspapers – *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* – use different frames. Both newspapers acknowledge China's economic power and political problems, yet the former frames China as a potential, albeit problematic, economic partner with the latter seeing China as a political threat (Golan & Lukito, 2015, p. 13). It is expected that propagandists push frames that are more conducive to their policy goals. In the case of North Korea's own news coverage of nuclear program, the issue is framed as one of relations with South Korea and the

US (Rich, 2014), highlighting its national security aspect. The effectiveness of propaganda can be seen in its capacity to influence frames, in this case the success of North Korean propaganda in affecting the news coverage in the country (Jang, 2013).

Another related and relevant impact of propaganda is observed in agenda-setting studies. In addition to the way issues are framed, propagandists can aim to influence which issues are covered, thus setting the agenda for media coverage and public discussions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). A recent study observed such an outcome of election propaganda in which the coverage of Indian general elections in 2014 predominantly highlighted one candidate, therefore, increased his popularity among the electorate (Baumann et al., 2018). When photographer David Guttenfelder was allowed to take photos inside North Korea, he posted 490 images from the country to his personal account out of which only 26% framed the country as a totalitarian regime (Holiday et al., 2017). Yet, when additional news outlets relayed his photos, some chose to increase this frequency up to over 50%, encouraging their readers to discuss the regime's characteristics and not its culture, history, or daily life (Holiday et al., 2017). A successful propaganda attempt can also influence what issues are discussed in media and in public.

The increasing adoption of social media usage, such was the case in Guttenfelder's photos, became an important variable in agenda-setting and framing studies. Individuals no longer needed to rely on media or opinion leaders in order to get their news. Rather, their social networks took over this particular function (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2009). Studies on social media enable practitioners and scholars not only examine the content but also map out the relationships among people (Boynton & Richardson, 2016). A Twitter hashtag, *#SaveDonbassPeople*, brought the human rights violations in Eastern Ukraine to the public agenda (Makhortykh & Lyebyedyev, 2015). The hashtag was also instrumental in creating a community of users who were interested in the issue (Makhortykh & Lyebyedyev, 2015). A successful propaganda attempt, thus, can have a dual purpose as it can synchronously create a community and influence the views of the masses.

Eventually, the manipulation of people's minds is the benchmark for success in propaganda activity (Gabroussenko, 2011, p. 52). The ultimate objective of a propagandist is to incite desirable behavior through communication. It is, therefore, possible to assess a propaganda campaign either through its influence on the outcomes or the processes. The existing studies outline how aspects can be described and assessed. For the processes, studies need to demonstrate the changes in framing, agenda-setting, or networks. For the outcomes, the link between communication and change among target audiences needs to be unpacked. The next section assesses the feasibility of these methods in limited access cases.

Limited Access and Propaganda

In the case of North Korea, however, there is virtually no access to any of such data points. Media platforms, including social media, cannot be used to monitor changes in public discourse. Observing behavior or attitude change among North Koreans is similarly challenging. We use these characteristics to construct a subset of propaganda cases. Labeling as limited access cases, we introduce instances in which there is little to no opportunity to gather data on the aforementioned propaganda change processes and outcomes. Our understanding of limited access is a relatively pragmatic one (cf. Koch, 2013, and the accompanying special issue). We accept the conditions of the situation, and investigate their impacts rather than their causes. In other words, we solely focus on how limited access to North Korea changes the propaganda practice. Albeit the focus of this study, North Korea is not the

first case to present such a challenge to practitioners and scholars. In this section, we present the insights drawn from studies covering two of such cases: Cuba and Iran.

Cuba has been an important topic in American foreign policy and a frequent target of American propaganda attempts especially within the Cold War context. Yet, as a report commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) summarizes, gathering data from the country was challenging (Roberts et al., 1999, p. 10):

> Traditional methodologies for gauging public opinion are unavailable to researchers who wish to study the attitudes and behavior of the people of Cuba. First of all, there is limited access to Cuba. Any polling organization would have to have government approval and would be closely monitored. A second problem is that, for all practical purposes, there are no Cuban tourists who travel abroad […] And while phone service to Cuba has vastly improved in the past few years, normal telephone sampling would be highly suspect inasmuch as Cubans would likely be distrustful of strangers calling and asking questions about life on the island.

The practitioners had limited access to Cuban society which barred them from carrying out random sampling methods. In 1998, the United States Information Agency implemented non-random sampling methods. They carried out a field research in Havana and asked individuals applying for American visas whether they have seen the TV Marti's – a station operated by the United States to disseminate messages in Cuba – broadcast (Elliston, 1999, p. 11). This non-random sampling procedure yielded biased results as the respondents did not represent the Cuban population. Even though the practitioners acknowledged the shortcomings of their methodology in their reports, they also argued that it was virtually impossible to conduct any random sampling in closed societies such as Cuba (Elliston, 1999, pp. 266–267).

Consequently, non-random sampling studies were used to assess the changes in Cuban public opinion. One popular data gathering method was to rely on Cuban travelers for focus groups and interviews (Elliston, 1999, p. 296). Another frequently consulted population was Cuban emigres. USAID (Roberts et al., 1999) conducted interviews at ports of entries and reached out to recent emigres to assess the effectiveness of American messages.

In addition to reaching parts of the populations, practitioners devised additional auxiliary methods to argue for the effectiveness of their communication attempts. Radio Swan – a station ran by American intelligence officers to broadcast anti-Castro propaganda – presents an intriguing attempt. The station was publicly denounced by Fidel Castro during his United Nations General Assembly address that took place only months after the station started its operations (Elliston, 1999, p. 9). The broadcast was deemed to be effective as it attracted the attention of high-level politicians. Similarly, digital propaganda attempts present internet blocking (Kalathil & Boas, 2001) as a measure of success, arguing that a censorship would be deemed necessary only if the message was conceived to be potentially effective. Last but not least, technical characteristics of transmissions were also used in assessing broadcasting-based propaganda (Elliston, 1999, p. 236).

Iran stands out as another contemporary case that has received American propaganda messages and limited the practitioners' access across decades. Throughout their practice, Americans relied a variety of tools to assess their effectiveness. Not unlike the Cuban case for instance, censorship was seen as a plausible assessment method. Voice of America's programing toward the country was regularly jammed by the Soviets during the Cold War (Hixson, 1998). It is argued that the jamming practice was used to suggest 'Russian fears that the broadcasts were working' (Kisatsky, 1999, p. 177).

Although it was not possible to poll any segments of the Iranian population, there were alternative areas to gauge audience reaction. Tabulation of radio receivers was used

to assess audience outreach (Hixson, 1998). Listener mails were also seen as feedback mechanisms about the effectiveness of US propaganda (Hixson, 1998; Kisatsky, 1999). Even though these mechanisms were useful to evaluate whether messages reached their target audiences, they did not provide any insights on whether the audiences accepted the messages or not (Kisatsky, 1999). In the case of propaganda attempts surrounding the 1953 coup d'état in the country, practitioners followed a more ambitious approach and assessed the effectiveness of their messages in terms of behavioral changes (Roberts, 2012). Voting records in August 1953 elections, changes in local radio coverage to more closely align with American foreign policy choices, and overall support to the coup by Iranians were introduced as partial evidences for propaganda success (Roberts, 2012).

Across both cases, we observe our initial conjecture that limited access requires unique and creative assessment tools at play. From auxiliary variables to non-random sampling, practitioners craft new devices that best fit the characteristics of the limited access context. The next section describes the context in the Korean peninsula by providing an account of post-war development and propaganda attempts of South Korea and North Korea.

INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS AND PROPAGANDA

It is virtually impossible to give an account of modern Korean history without an appeal to propaganda as it has been a constant fact of life in both sides of the demilitarized zone (DMZ).

Following the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was freed from Japanese occupation. However, Koreans were not able to create one new independent state, which was divided into two zones at the 38th parallel, splitting the peninsula roughly in half. The United States and the Soviet Union occupied respectively the southern and northern parts and finally established different types of governments, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), in 1948. Both Koreas claimed the entire peninsula as their land in their respective constitutions, not recognizing the other as a legitimate actor.

North Korea started the Korean War in 1950 in an attempt to unify the two Koreas under communist leadership. Particularly during the Korean War (1950–1953), propaganda was an important component of the warfare (Kim & Haley, 2017). Traditionally, it is argued that psychological warfare plays a more important role in wars between same ethnicities compared with inter-ethnic wars (Hwang, 1995; Kim, 2008). Considering that there was almost no difference in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture, and language between the two Koreas, the competition for support of the Koreans meant earning legitimacy through ideas. Both the American-led UN forces on behalf of South Korea and North Korea utilized propaganda materials to get the upper hand in the psychological warfare. The United States was already experienced with psychological warfare because of its war against the Nazis in the World War II. The United States and UN focused more on short-term goals to win the mind and hearts of the Korean public on both sides of the border mainly via leaflets, while North Korea's focus was on long-term goals to win support for the communist ideology mainly via newspapers and radio (Hwang, 1995; Kim 2008). During the Korean War, the number of leaflets by the US army is estimated to be around 2.5 billion (Chung, 2004, p. 95–96).

Starting with the end of the Korean War in 1953, the North and South found themselves in need to not only to create a sense of community among its citizens through political communication but also to depict the other party in a less favorable light – either to each other or to the foreign audiences. Moreover, the Armistice Agreement of the Korean War was signed in 1953 without the

participation of the South Korean govern-ment. A truce in the Korean War without a peace treaty had made the Korean Peninsula a potential war zone and had intensified ten-sions between the two sides through compe-tition for security and propaganda. From the foundation of both countries until the end of Cold War, the two Koreas have shown exis-tential antagonism (Armstrong, 2005) being threatened by the existence of one another. Propaganda vis-a-vis the public across the 38th parallel played an important role since the first day of division. In the following sec-tions, we present a succinct historical over-view of the region, focusing on the impacts of social, political, economic, and cultural developments on propaganda.

North Korea Since 1953

Since 1953, North Korea has pursued limited interaction with international society and primarily occupies the world agenda through its nuclear program. The country sought political stability and economic development through communist one-party dictatorship with the help of Russia and China shortly after the end of the war. It has been reflected as a country with a 'ruinous brand of cen-trally controlled socialism' (Oh & Hassig, 2010, p. 90).

The North Korean political agenda, includ-ing its dominant ideology, is determined by the individual leader, rather than a discus-sion among the governing party (Jang et al., 2015, p. 43). *Juche*, self-reliance, was an idea brought by Kim Il-Sung (Park, 2002). With the introduction of this ideology into the constitution, the country pushed a new type of desirable citizen (Byman & Lind, 2010, p. 52). Espousing self-reliance, the ideology is observable across all segments and func-tions of society to the extent that it is likened to a religious belief rather than a political idea (Park, 2002). *Songun* – or military first – was similarly introduced by Kim Jong-Il (Suh, 2002). The North Korean administration has

been keen on disseminating this particular idea so that the country can 'protect itself from its capitalist enemies' (Byman & Lind, 2010, p. 52). Even during the Six-Party talks regarding its nuclear arsenal, North Korea always appealed to the idea of being inde-pendent 'from any kind of western power or ideas' (Jang, 2013, p. 199).

The dominant ideologies are promoted through state-controlled media outlets to the citizens, establishing a stronger image of its leader and government (Jang et al., 2015, p. 48). These media outlets would, more often than not, portray the United States, and other foreign powers including Japan as the aggres-sive actors causing disturbance in the region (Jang et al., 2015, p. 49). South Korea occupies an important theme in North Korean propa-ganda toward its citizens. Up until 1980s, the South was depicted as an economically back-ward country (Gabroussenko, 2011). Since then, the depictions have changed, prob-ably based on the economic development of the South, into a conservatism theme which shows South Korea 'through the images of ugly devastation and misery, which dehuman-izing colonial modernization had allegedly brought to land' (Gabroussenko, 2011, p. 41). South Korean governments are depicted as puppets of the American imperialists.

Moreover, as North Korea's economy was in better shape than South Korea until the mid-1970s (Ku, 2018), it started and had been more active in its cross-border propaganda after the war, aiming at a North-led Korean unification (Joo, 2016). With the end of Cold War and being surpassed by South Korea in terms of the economy, North Korean propa-ganda has taken a more defensive posture by trying to dominate and block South Korean loudspeaker broadcasts and targeting its own public rather than South Koreans (Joo, 2016). North Korean propaganda leaflets are seen in South Korean cities from time to time criticizing South Korean governments (par-ticularly conservative ones) as puppets of the United States and showing North Korea as a benign supporter of unification (Byun, 2018;

News1, 2017; Park, 2016). However, given South Korea's ease of access to information freely and the South's apparent superiority to the North in terms of economy, freedoms, and social life, North Korea's propaganda leaflets appearing in South Korea are not effective (Park, 2016).

South Korea Since 1953

To the south of the DMZ, there was also a need to build a nation and disseminate a new national idea among citizens (Hong, 2011, p. 986). As part of the American anti-communism strategy during the Cold War, the South Korean government under President Syngman Rhee enacted the National Security Act to prevent anti-national activities and the spread of communism. Through American aid, South Korea began to integrate into the capitalist system (Bizhan, 2018). Prior to the Korean War in 1950, there was a wide range of guerrilla activities on the 38th parallel (Halliday, 1973).

After the end of the war, the construction of a modern nation in South Korea must be understood in its own history and traditions and in its special relationship with the neighboring powers. Under the Cold War regime, South Korea has moved quickly from an underdeveloped authoritarian country to the current developed democratic state and achieved this in a compact manner. South Korea was placed at the forefront of the anti-communism expansion, in which South Korea has promoted a national identity and rapidly achieved national development and economic growth through American military and economic aid and state-led economic policies.

After South Korea developed more rapidly and surpassed North Korea in almost every aspect, including GDP per capita, exports, technology, conventional military strength, diplomatic ties, and exchanges with foreign countries since the mid-1970s, South Korea became more confident in its position vis-à-vis North Korea (Ayhan & Jang, 2019). The

end of the Cold War, on top of this newly emerged confidence, brought change to inter-Korean relations.

The Roh Tae-Woo government normalized its relations with socialist regimes which have traditionally been allies of North Korea – an era known in South Korean foreign affairs as 'Northern Policy'. The Roh Tae-Woo government legalized government-sanctioned or approved exchanges between South and North Korea following its 7-7 Declaration. Particularly, since the progressive Kim Dae-Jung's Sunshine Policy, South Korea welcomed and encouraged other countries' diplomatic recognition of North Korea. While South Korean government propaganda toward North Korea was seen as an essential part of its warfare strategy when the two countries were very close in terms of development, with the widening gap as the South Korean economy took off, South Korea needed less propaganda to show its excellence to the people of North. The two Koreas agreed to halt propaganda against each other following engagement policies of progressive South Korean governments. In 2004, all loudspeaker broadcasting at the border was halted, only to be briefly restarted in 2015. The Panmunjom Declaration which was signed during the third inter-Korean summit, under newly elected progressive Moon Jae-In in South Korea, called for ending propaganda activities across the border once again.

In summary, Korean relations have always had a strong propaganda component which was partially influenced by the relative social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of the countries. It can be argued that South Korea performed relatively better in the system battle against North Korea in the 1970s and ended the long-sustained military dictatorship through political participation by citizens in the late 1980s. The next section provides details on how we gathered data to describe the propaganda projects of non-state actors in South Korea and reconstructed the case narratives within the particular background discussed here.

METHODOLOGY

In order to present an inclusive picture of the South Korean practice, we structured our research as a case study. Based on the theoretical and historical context shared in the preceding sections, we introduce a narrative of how practitioners assess their work. We employ an 'interpretive case study' approach to explore alternative ways of linking an established theory and evidence based on specific historical cases (Lijphart, 1971, p. 692). Our aim is, ultimately, to uncover 'patterns of invariance and constant association' that are common to relatively small sets of cases (Ragin, 1987, p. 51). Thus, we simply explain why a specific historical event occurred rather than pursuing empirical generalization in any way through our research.

The politically charged nature of our study and limited access issues require a relatively flexible access to the practitioners. In line with our case study methodology, we followed a convenience sampling approach (Gerring & Christenson, 2017). The propaganda projects, practitioners, and survey participants are selected due to their availability, interest in the project, and their reputation as practitioners (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). These data sources are used to construct a case narrative that shows the relationship between assumed causes and observed effects. In our case, our focus is on how limited access pushes the practitioners to devise novel methods to assess their propaganda projects.

For our interviews, we planned to conduct five interviews with prominent activists who engage in propaganda activities vis-a-vis North Korea. The concept of 'prominent activist' does not have a set definition. For the purposes of our study, we sought information rich cases. Therefore, we selected the interviewees on the scale and frequency of their activities and the media exposure that they received. The interviews took place from May 25 to June 15, 2018 in Korean. Two interviews, with Lee Min-Bok, the head of Campaign for North

Korean In Direct Way, and Jung Gwang-Il,[1] the head of No Chain, were conducted face-to-face and recorded following their consent. We conducted the interviews in public settings near the workplaces of the interviewees. The interviews took around 90 minutes. The third interviewee agreed only to an unrecorded phone interview which lasted 40 minutes. The latter also did not give his consent to his name being used. Therefore, he is referred to as Interviewee X here. All three interviews were semi-structured. All three activists that we have interviewed are defectors from North Korea who have settled in South Korea. The fourth and fifth interviews were dropped due to repeated scheduling conflicts. The research team saw these conflicts as an expression of hesitation to join the project given the sensitive nature of their practices. Therefore, we did not aggressively pursue these particular contacts. Instead, we sought opportunities to increase the number of interviewees through snowballing sampling. Yet, all three interviewees agreed that there were not others that were as active as the five individuals we contacted because of the high costs and risks associated with these propaganda activities. Therefore, we posit that despite the relatively small number of interviews, the accounts of these three practitioners portray a near-complete picture of the practice.

In addition to the interviews, we analyzed the propaganda materials of these three activists for emerging themes. Through an inductive approach, we looked for main ideas and repeating messages across the documents (Bowen, 2009). Lee Min-Bok gave us his missionary and non-missionary leaflets. He further provided two texts suggesting why he began sending the balloons and best practices for making North Koreans believe the contents of the leaflets. Interviewee X provided us with 31 photos of his leaflet samples, contents of USBs, and technical details of his balloon-sending operations. Jung Gwang-Il on the other hand showed us the contents of SD cards during the interview rather than

giving them to us suggesting that the contents change frequently.

Finally, in order to triangulate the data with an alter-perception in addition to the ego-perception of the activists (Arts, 2001), we surveyed North Korean defectors in South Korea asking them about their perception of the effectiveness of the propaganda activities. Since a public opinion poll in North Korea is not feasible, the North Korean defectors in South Korea are the next best sample to provide us with this alter-perception. North Korean defectors, although a biased sample, are often used as the most, and sometimes only, available sample to study public opinion in North Korea (Jeong, 2005; Kim, 2012; Kwon, 2007, 2009; O'Carroll, 2014). We contacted 20 defector-related organizations or gatekeeper individuals to fill out and/or share our survey with other defectors. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and relative difficulty of finding defector respondents, we were able to get only 13 responses. All questions, except for demographic ones, used five-point Likert scale responses and inquired about the factors that motivated them to leave North Korea and their insights regarding the effectiveness of South Korean propaganda activities. Although far from being complete, our data gathering procedures are consistent with studies and practices in limited cases as discussed earlier in the chapter.

The objective of our analysis is to present a coherent narrative of how South Korean propagandists assess the effectiveness of their campaigns. Our analysis primarily relied on the accounts gathered through interviews. The first two recorded interviews were transcribed. Together with the interview notes from Interviewee X, two of the authors carried an inductive analysis of the text and identified recurring themes and prominent arguments. The propaganda materials were used to assess the accuracy of the arguments made by the practitioners and to further detail the themes identified by the authors. Last, information gathered through

the defector survey was used to triangulate the sources used to reconstruct the case narratives.

FINDINGS: THE STORIES OF SOUTH KOREAN PRACTITIONERS

Who are the South Korean practitioners? Before moving forward with what they do, we inquired about the 'who' aspect of their narrative, asking our interviewees to discuss their understanding of activism and activist. The main goal of the activists in South Korea engaging in propaganda activities in North Korea was to expose people to lives outside North Korea and to provide them with alternative facts. Even though interviewees presented this particular intermediate goal first, they also mentioned their ultimate goals as to make individuals defect from the country in the short-run and to destabilize the Kim regime in North Korea in the long-run. Jung Gwang-Il asserted that there were 700,000 North Korean soldiers near the border with South Korea and if they were to be exposed to leaflets, USBs and broadcasting coming from the South, it could mean the toppling of the regime in the North. Furthermore, he suggested that after being exposed to the information coming from outside, the North Korean youth could ask for change in their country. Interviewee X also sent pamphlets to North Korea encouraging North Koreans to protest against their government. On the other hand, Lee Min-Bok's goals were more moderate asking North Koreans to change their lives by leaving the country like he did more than two decades ago. This particular claim was supported by the propaganda materials.

Looking at the messages conveyed in these propaganda materials, we observed four main themes: daily life, politics, popular culture, and religion. Interviewee X argued for the importance of portraying the daily life and opportunities in South Korea. In a

similar vein, Jung Gwang-Il produced videos of foreigners, third-party neutrals who have been to both South and North Korea, comparing the two Koreas' streets, lifestyles, and farms. They also sent videos of ordinary lives of Europeans and Americans to North Korea, which showcased their reality rather than staged contents. In a two-page document where he explains 'the ways to make North Koreans believe the contents of leaflets', Lee Min-Bok argues that propaganda activities must begin with the familiar to eliminate the mistrust; then, one must seize the opportunity to make them ask questions about what they already know (Lee, n.d.). He encourages North Koreans to talk to the Chinese about South Korea. 'You call China (*Jungguk*) heaven (*cheonguk*), right' asks the leaflet, adding 'then why do the Chinese go to South Korea to work or to get married' (Lee, n.d.b)? It continues to ask if the South is living poorly and the North is living more prosperously, how did these 'beggars' open a tourist resort in Kumgang Mountain and an industrial complex in Kaesong where more than 50,000 North Koreans work (Lee, n.d)? The leaflets suggest the reader that one should go to China to check these facts through radio, the internet, and television, asking by the way, why you cannot use radio, the internet, and television in the so-called 'strong and prosperous country' (Lee, n.d).

All interviewees discuss political events and politics to challenge the North Korean narratives of events in order to make North Korean citizens question their government. Lee Min-Bok's leaflets raise questions about the Korean War regarding whether it was really started by the South as the North Korea's official narrative suggests. Interviewee X challenges the Kim Il-Sung's family tree through his news-article-like alternative facts. Jung Gwang-Il's content includes 'facts' about why Kim Jung-Nam, the late half-brother of Kim Jong-Un, was killed. The latter also sends news related to inter-Korean relations, including a North Korean concert in Seoul,

which is not shown to the ordinary North Koreans. The most important reason for providing North Koreans with these 'facts' is defector-activists' rightful conviction that information in North Korea is very much controlled by the government and ordinary North Koreans do not have access to these alternative facts. Lee Min-Bok suggests that the reason why North Korean leaflet propaganda toward South Korea cannot be as effective as vice versa is that South Korea is an open society where people can access any kind of information they want while this is not the case for North Koreans (Park, 2016).

The third theme that emerged from the interviews and the propaganda contents is popular culture. Popular culture products, particularly South Korean and American films, TV shows, and music, are one way to expose and attract them to the outside world. Jung Gwang-Il and Interviewee X send SD cards and USBs to the North with such popular culture contents. Jung Gwang-Il prefers American films and dramas rather than Korean ones, since the latter might also give North Koreans a negative image of the life in the South. The video contents also include entertainment shows in South Korea and rather less Westernized pop music videos from the South. Interviewee X prefers South Korean shows and music. What is common to both is the belief that the good quality production of these pop culture products and the lifestyles that they showcase would be attractive to ordinary North Koreans, indeed more attractive than the political contents which might even backfire simply because of being labeled as propaganda as implied by both interviewees. In other words, apparent political neutrality of the pop culture contents is seen as effective for the expected outcome, which is making North Koreans question their lives in North Korea and potentially oppose the government or defect from the country.

Another interesting finding in our interviews is that both Jung and Interviewee X also send South Korean goods, including snacks,

rice, ramen, and even socks along with the SD cards and USBs to allure relatively poorer North Koreans to the contents of the propaganda materials. In the media interviews, practitioners talk about how one-dollar bills and small amounts of rice can supplement a North Korean individual's life (Ham, 2018a, 2018b). These material incentives are seen by practitioners as a way to allure North Koreans to magnify the influence of their propaganda. According to Jung, the underlying assumption is that for North Koreans to stand up against their regime, first, their stomachs must be full which the rice and dollar bills are for; and second, they must know what is going on in the world which the USBs and leaflets are for (Ham, 2018a).

The last theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of Christianity through these propaganda activities targeting the North. Lee Min-Bok sends two kinds of leaflets, one is more political and personal in its contents, and the other purely missionary. Jung Gwang-Il sends the Bible in e-book and audio-book formats. Interviewee X, on the other hand, claimed that his activities did not have connection with any religious groups. However, it should be noted that the packages he sends carry stickers that say 'God loves you'. The media coverage of defector-activists' propaganda toward North Korea also clearly show the active presence and support of conservative churches in sending balloons and pets toward North Korea (Ham, 2018a).

The defectors shared similar views about the content of materials. One question asked the respondents what had an influence in their decision to defect. The answer with highest weight was 'I expected to live in a country with better economic life', followed by 'economic difficulties in North Korea'. When asked a hypothetical question of what would increase the likelihood of North Koreans' defection, 'experiencing extreme hunger and poverty' was the most heavily weighted answer, followed by 'exposure to South Korean popular culture'. In other words, defectors also argued that

South Korean popular culture products coming through the North Korean border were influential while leaflets coming from South Korea were not. Defectors and practitioners agree that a more neutral exposure to popular culture is an effective way to convince North Koreans to turn against the regime, while smuggling through the border is an effective way to do it.

Smuggling the USBs – or other material – into North Korea required the creativity of practitioners who devised unique methods to disseminate their content as well as to argue for the effectiveness of their delivery. Lee Min-Bok and Interviewee X rely on hot air balloons whereas Jung Gwang-Il employs plastic bottles released to the sea to cross the border. While the former two rely on calculations of the wind, the latter used calculations of the tide to find the best launch times. The practitioners argued that around 30% of bottles reach North Korea based on their study of tides and water flows (Kwon, 2018). Parts of the bottles that did not reach their targets were found in the open sea, and endangering lives of animals such as sea turtles (Kim, 2018). In a separate media interview, Jung Gwang-Il also revealed that he uses GPS tracking devices to observe where his material reach (Mok, 2017). This particular point proved to be a substantial point of contention among the practitioners. Given the high costs associated with propaganda activities, these non-governmental groups rely on donations to continue their works. For donors, the channel – or how the messages and materials were sent to North Korea – seemed to be the ultimate deciding factor in the effectiveness of propaganda. Therefore, the group that managed to provide a coherent and compelling account of how their material reached the audiences in the North became more likely to receive donations. It should be noted that our interview protocol did not probe about the technical details of the delivery methods. However, the practitioners voluntarily provided detailed information across the board. Their willingness can be used to argue for the

relative importance of their technical acumen in their work.

The propaganda materials are not directed at a specific audience. When South Korean activists let their balloons fly – or their bottles swim –, their only expectation is to reach a North Korean. Although Jung Gwang-Il, as stated earlier in this paper, positioned the soldiers near the border as a plausible audience, his statements were more about the distance limitations of his methods, rather than a strategic audience choice. Yet, mistrust between the two societies is a constant obstacle. In an attempt to build trust with the readers of the propaganda leaflets, Lee Min-Bok gives all his contact information and his background, particularly the fact that he too is a North Korean. Interviewee X, on the other hand, discussed a cascading activation model. He argued that talking to neutrals – such as ethnic Koreans living in China or Central Asia – was his objective. He personally was not convinced by a propaganda material he saw. For him, the turning point was his exposure to a *Koryoin* – a name given to Koreans who have been in Soviet Union and CIS countries for almost a century – while serving in the military.

Jung Gwang-Il also said in the interview that smuggling of South Korean and American popular culture products into the black market in which individuals voluntarily acquire them were more effective to expose North Koreans to the outside world in an exponential way.

Yet, how do the practitioners know the effectiveness of their methods? How can they make sure, for instance, the material on a USB drive is read let alone changes someone opinion? The snippets we shared in the paragraphs above are predominantly based on the experiences of practitioners – either what they have gone through personally or what they heard from the defectors. The arguments are not necessarily based on a systematic assessment. None of the practitioners included in our study has carried out such a project. Yet, it is not due to the lack of knowledge. As argued above, the practitioners often

find themselves in need of arguing for the effectiveness of their methods. However, not unlike the experiences in Cuba and Iran, their access to data is limited.

The vast majority of activists involved in propaganda vis-à-vis North Korea are North Korean defectors. Therefore, these practitioners' confidence in their propaganda methods comes from being insiders, knowing the North Korean society, its regime, political climate, and the needs of its people. They want to create 'second public opinion' (Chang & Jeong, 2015, p. 135), a private discourse as opposed to the government's official discourse. Various studies suggest that due to the changes in North Korean society, such alternative discourse is more prevalent as the majority of North Koreans have access to banned foreign goods and information which has a great impact on their lives (CSIS, 2017; Chang & Jeong, 2015; Jeong et al., 2015). However, some studies show that North Koreans prefer interpersonal communication via their personal networks than mediated communication in their access to information coming from outside North Korea (Kwon, 2007, 2009). Natural word-of-mouth within the country is found to be more preferable than forced exposure to materials (Kwon, 2007, 2009). These findings are in line with Jung Gwang-Il's idea of introducing popular culture and other videos into the black market, which then can find its way into the private discourses of North Koreans, helping form a second public opinion.

Both Lee Min-Bok and Jung Gwang-Il suggested that they utilize censorship and reactions as a success criterion. The fact that the North Korean administration is irritated by the propaganda activities coming from the South was the best indicator of these activities' effectiveness. They believe that the administration is aware of – and disturbed by – their activities as during inter-Korean meetings and agreements, including the most recent Panmunjom Declaration of 2018, one of the first issues being raised was stopping propaganda activities. Practitioners posit

that if the North Korean regime is assertively asking them to stop, their methods must be influential enough to attract the officials' attention. Lee Min-Bok says he received many death threats from the North, and is currently being protected by six rotating South Korean police officers, a fact that we also witnessed during our interview. Jung Gwang-Il drew a similar conclusion about his impact. As smuggling materials through the Chinese border became more expensive, he turned to using drones which would fly to the North where a contact was waiting for them. Chinese authorities raided their hideout and confiscated their material in 2016, following a tip from the North Koreans whose interest shows that the drone propaganda campaign was successful.

An additional arena was defectors. Both Lee and Jung also suggested that the North Korean defector interviews show that many defectors chose to leave their country after being exposed to either propaganda leaflets or foreign pop culture products. This was another measure for their activities' effectiveness. Interviewee X, on the other hand, suggested that he could not know the effectiveness of his activities and did not comment further on the assessment aspect.

LESSONS FROM THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Our study of South Korean propaganda has confirmed our assumption that the established frameworks to study propaganda fall short of providing guidance given the limited access. Unsurprisingly, there are overlaps between previous limited access cases. Yet, two aspects of the case make the Korean experience unique. First, a complexity stems from the relationship between the two nations. In both the Cuba and Iran cases, the US stood as an outsider. Yet, with South Korea and North Korea, there is a shared history and culture among other traits. Second,

the contemporary nature of the case changes certain tools and platforms. The experience of the practitioners was illustrative in identifying what can and cannot be used for assessment. In this section, we re-evaluate the case narratives.

The South Korean experience includes assessment on three levels. Although the literature discussed the impacts of propaganda on outcomes and processes, the limited access requires tweaks. We argue that the practitioners cannot look directly at the processes but rather consider two aspects of their messages to argue for their effectiveness: the content of their messages and the technical characteristics of the platform they are using. The outcomes, on the other hand, can only be indirect.

The first level focuses on the practitioners' capacity to produce messages and their credibility. The data within this perspective is gathered by engaging with the practitioners. Yet, two issues our study faced demonstrate important points to consider. First, funding sources have the potential to influence the capacity to produce messages as well as their content. In our case, the role of religion raised an important concern about message formation. We have observed that the religious overtones attracted the attention of religious organizations and increased the donations made to the activists. Given the fact that the practitioner suggested that there were not many activists who do propaganda activities vis-a-vis the North chiefly because of the high costs associated with these activities, a funding source might change the content. Besides religious donations, Lee Min-Bok suggested there were activists launching balloons to get more media attention and more donations in turn. Jung Gwang-Il claimed that some activists would come to his activities to have their pictures taken to suggest that they were also prominent activists, in turn to get donations themselves. Second, the credibility of the propagandists cannot be seen as devoid of context. The mistrust between the South and the North presented a challenge to establish

credibility for the practitioners. Interviewee X argued that all of these propaganda activities could be ineffective due to the difficult of establishing credibility. Therefore, the first level of assessment needs to be supported by data source triangulation through contextual/background information and propaganda material in addition to engaging with practitioners.

The second level looks at the technical capabilities of the platform. A precursor to successful behavioral change is message dissemination. A propaganda attempt cannot be successful if the target audiences are not exposed to the messages. Therefore, a propagandist can use their reach as a measure. In balloon propaganda, Lee Min-Bok takes pride in his engineering capacity arguing that his balloons, for which he holds a couple of patents, are the only ones that can reach regions beyond the border. Jeong Gwang-Il sends out bottles based on his calculations of tides – which come only twice a month. Interviewee X integrated timers to his balloons to assess delivery. Assessment at this level should include data compatible with the channels used, such as wind patterns for balloons and tide patterns for floating bottles.

The third and last level includes indirect outcomes. As it is virtually impossible to assess the direct outcomes or changes in the audience behavior in limited access cases, the practitioners found auxiliary success variables. However, the lack of random sampling requires the practitioners to corroborate data from different resources. The mismatch we witnessed between the findings of our interviews and impressionistic survey better explains the need for corroboration. Jung Gwang-Il decided to use American popular culture items instead of Korean dramas based on an assumption that the former would be more effective. The respondents to our surveys argued that South Korean dramas were seen as more effective by defectors. Yet, it is not possible to generalize the results of our survey or Jung's assumptions. A more accurate way to assess

the effectiveness of content is to include both types of data, as well as additional accounts of defectors and practitioners, and proxy variables for success. In our study, we found that practitioners use the viewpoint of the other to argue for such effects. As a successful propaganda attempt should make it impossible or at least difficult for the receiving part to achieve its own objectives, any reaction coming from the North Korean government is seen as success – ranging from death threats to raids.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented how South Korean practitioners assess the effectiveness of their campaigns to North Korea – an environment to which they have limited access. Our modest objective was to devise a framework that could encompass the creativity of practitioners. We used the practices of non-governmental actors originating in South Korea and directed at North Korea given the prominent role of propaganda in the history of the Peninsula and the relatively isolated situation of North Korea.

Our study, despite its contributions, is not without its limitations. First and foremost, we realized that a study of contemporary propaganda practices is a sensitive endeavor. With its political nature and imaginative delivery methods, it is a challenging task to solicit uncut responses from any of the participants. Second, not all our invited participants – practitioners and defectors in our survey alike – was excited about our study. Therefore, our findings are clouded by a self-selection bias. However, we believe such volunteer behavior – or lack thereof – is an obstacle likely to be faced by other researchers and practitioners. Yet, it still should be acknowledged as a limitation. Third, our data triangulation lacked an important source – information coming from the audience. We could not use any data points from North

Korea to corroborate our findings. The very reason that started the research project, limited access, remains as a limitation. Consequently, we present our findings as one way to study propaganda, rather than the only or even the most effective way. Our model simply presents an unprecedented way of thinking.

We shared our findings as a three-level assessment framework: content, platform, indirect outcomes. The framework has implications both for the study of propaganda and practitioners. From the perspective of propaganda studies, the relative importance of this chapter is based on its articulation that encourages matching the creativity of practitioners. In other words, our framework lays out a way to study propaganda campaigns in which traditional theories and models cannot be used due to access issues. For practitioners, the case presented might provide novel approaches to message delivery and assessment. Similarly, the model can be used to design, execute, and assess campaigns.

The model is likely to benefit from future studies that integrate additional cases with limited control of media platforms. In North Korea, government control over media comes close to a complete blackout. In limited control cases where a government does not necessarily block all media platforms but controls the content, it might be easier to gather audience perception data and improve the model. Moreover, the history of North–South relations creates an intriguing dynamic between the two societies based on a tale of shared history and mutual mistrust. Therefore, the model can be improved by studies focusing on cases in which practitioner and target countries have different prior relations.

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Note

1   Despite the sensitive nature of their work, most North Korean defector-activists appear on South Korean and foreign media using their real names. In our interviews with three activists, two suggested that we use their real names. Since these are elite interviews which are also supplemented with their other interviews in the media, we use Lee Min-Bok and Jung Kwang-Il's real names. On the other hand, the third interviewee asked to be anonymous, hence referred to as Interviewee X here.

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