

How Rumors about North Korea Develop

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April 26, 2020



By Andray Abrahamian

Jeremy Tunstall, a pathbreaking scholar of media studies once wrote: “rumors tend to occur when there is an imbalance between an urgent demand for information and a failure in the supply.”
(*Journalists at Work*, 1971)

When it comes to news about North Korea, demand is high and information from on the ground is always low. Did something happen with Kim Jong -un’s health this month? Probably. Do we know what that is? Not really. Reasonable speculation about this has turned into a maelstrom of fake news, thinly sourced hyperbole and echo-chambers. Daily NK on April 21 reported that Kim had had a heart “procedure” and was recuperating. A week later social media seems to have concluded he is dead.

Why does this happen? There are a number of factors that shape how journalists cover and audiences consume news about North Korea. Let’s look at a couple. First, news media wants stories to be dramatic.

Recall the currency reform of 2009, which was announced on November 30th and implemented immediately. It was (poorly) designed to re-centralize control over economic activity and confiscate privately held wealth.

The Daily NK broke this story on the day it happened, from reports provided by its network of reporters in North Korea. They told of panic in markets and confusion in general. They continued reporting discontent in the days afterwards, with security services on alert lest civil unrest develop. The Daily NK went “into overdrive,” as its former international editor, Christopher Green, once told me. “For a big story like this, we have to get sources from across the country, as many as we can.” Drawing on reports as they did from a variety of sources in different provinces gave the reports a high degree of credibility. Daily NK in the weeks afterwards also presented balanced and sober analyses of the event.

International media? Much more focused on the “panic”, “chaos” and “protest and violence”. This was, of course, because the theatrical element of news is what sells. The idea of turmoil and individuals widely protesting against the state in a country such as North Korea is compelling because of how unusual and potentially monumental it would be. The extent to which this was actually happening at the end of 2009 was not verifiable, but that was swept away as dramatic narratives of unrest took hold.

A second factor to look at is another Tunstall concept: that of the competitor-colleague. Asia correspondents are few in number, and Korea correspondents are fewer still. Their interactions are frequent, with offices often in the same buildings or neighborhoods and foreign correspondents' clubs providing social and professional support.

Specialist journalists form a kind of fraternity, self-generating values and codes of behavior. They are seeking to get better sources and coverage than their competition, but they also help each other, forming community bonds as a reaction to the shared challenges they face. Tunstall's work found that most specialists at rival organizations swapped material with their competitors. They act as informal mechanisms of peer review and pressure on any topic. This, of course, is performed unevenly: individuals and any particular news outlet's editorial policies matter, after all.

When it comes to reporting on Daily NK or South Korean intelligence leaks on North Korea, which are often anonymous single sources, competitor-colleagues can act as a brake on each other, moderating and filtering what gets reported in English-language media. They will often check in with one another to confirm if something "passes the smell test" or if anyone has other sources that can confirm what is going on. Thus, single source leaks or rumors – which are often picked up by South Korean newspapers – get frequently reprinted in tabloids that don't have staff in Asia, such as Metro.co.uk or the New York Post, but don't get reported on in more respected media outlets.

This past week, however, the process of informal community moderation was basically shattered once CNN ran the headline "US source: North Korean leader in grave danger after surgery". This story also appears to be based on an anonymous single source in Washington. Still, given the weight of CNN in the field, the globe's media began to echo this story and it quickly became too late for any of this moderation to work. Everyone *had* to report on it.

In an era of churnalism, news outlets without on-the-ground staff rely on reporting on the reporting of others. Following the CNN story, it appears as if each round of reportage amplified the drama in the story a little. Chinese rumors, differing somewhat from the rumors in English, get reported by Chinese language tabloids and then added to the rumor mill in western news.

So. What happened with Chairman Kim this past week in North Korea? We don't know for now. We should be open to a range of possibilities. But given how news media interacts with the DPRK's black box, we also should be skeptical of the most dramatic stories.

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