

# Could there be a North Korean “Spring”?



Jang Jin-sung knows what it's like to grow up brainwashed.

As a child in North Korea, he had only happy memories — but that's because he didn't know any better, he says. "I hadn't seen the outside world," he told FRONTLINE. "I didn't have any reference points to distinguish between good and evil."

As a young man, he was appointed as a government propagandist, writing editorials and columns that touted the North's successes to South Koreans, along with "epic poems" about the Supreme Leader. The job came with a major perk: As a trusted official, Jang was allowed access to South Korean books and television shows that were banned for ordinary North Koreans.

"The instant I saw those books, my thoughts just changed," Jang said. He saw how much more developed South Korea was, and how far behind his own country had fallen. "The more I realized these things, I felt myself more and more alone."

"North Koreans have lived for so long with an absence of real information about the outside world," said Sue Mi Terry, a former CIA analyst on North Korea.

"One of the ways that the Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un regimes have been able to continue with this system is by a monopoly of information, by really excluding outside unwanted information from coming in and educating the public."

That's starting to change, whether the North Korean leadership likes it or not. As [Secret State of North Korea](#) shows, over the past several years, new technology has begun to offer ordinary North Koreans glimpses of the world beyond their own borders. But will this access to new information diminish the regime's hold on its people?

## Information as Currency

North Korea is known as the Hermit Kingdom for a reason. For decades, it's kept its people isolated, steeped in propaganda that deifies the leadership and demonizes its enemies. Despite [his love for basketball](#) and burgers, the new Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un, has largely followed his father's lead when it comes to controlling the information flow.

The difference now is that technology has made it more difficult to keep a lid on news from the outside world. It may be illegal to buy foreign DVDs, but they're still sold in marketplaces. USB drives make data even easier to share. Even officials have one or two illicit thumb drives with movies or television shows that they pass from one to another, experts say. Mobile phones sold in North Korea have to be registered with the state and can't call out of the country, but some enterprising North Koreans have modified them to call China, and rent them for others to use. Every piece of information gleaned from outside gives North Koreans a chance to question what the government tells them inside.

Information, in some circles, has become a kind of social currency in North Korea. "It's actually quite in vogue ... you're not part of a conversation unless you can bring pieces of information of what's happening outside the country into a circle of friends," said Victor Cha, a professor who served as the National Security Council's director for Asian affairs under George W. Bush. "That's very interesting because that creates a collective way of thinking about how the government is falling short on the social contract with its citizens. You get much more independent thinking."

But that thinking hasn't translated to widespread protest. That's in part because such dissent is almost impossible to foment without getting caught. Under Kim Jong-il, there were an estimated 50,000 domestic counterintelligence agents looking for spies and dissidents, according to a May 2013 [report](#) by the Washington-based Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

Kim Jong-un, who experts believe is still working to consolidate his political power, has invested more heavily in internal security. In a speech at the Ministry of State Security shortly after taking power, Kim Jong-un urged agents to "firmly and mercilessly smash impure, hostile elements" within the country. He's also cracked down on defectors, which has made it more difficult for people to sneak out reliable information on leadership shakeups and economic developments, according to an official South Korean government report [cited by The Wall Street Journal](#).

## "True Koreans"

There's also the matter of what North Koreans truly want. Life inside the country has improved since the 1990s, when a widespread famine [took as many as 2 to 3 million lives](#).

Not all North Koreans today would flee the country if they could, says David Kang, director of the Korean Studies Institute at the University of Southern California. "We know what we think," he said. "They wake up every day wishing they were free, dreaming of democracy. That's what we hope. And if they just see our goods ... how rich we are."

Many defectors have become disillusioned with South Korea, he said. Despite newfound freedom, Kang said, "they see crass materialism, a loss of family values." The North Korean government has worked hard to impose the notion that North Koreans are the "True Koreans," and for some, that message has stuck.

Kang shared a grim joke shared among some North Korean defectors: A North Korean and a South Korean are walking down a street when they see a man fall into a river. The North Korean runs to pull him out. The South Korean calls an ambulance. "It's telling how they say, 'These are our values. These South Koreans, we're not really like them.'"

"They may not like what their regime is doing," Kang said. "But to go from there to a decision that ... we have to wipe out everything, and risk everything to change — it is a much bigger step."

## 'This Country of Freedom'

In the meantime, information continues to trickle out — and in — to the country, spurred largely by dedicated defectors and North Koreans still at home.

After Jang, the propagandist, started delving into South Korean media, he became desperate to share what he'd learned with friends and family. But to do so would be an act of treason, punishable by torture and imprisonment or even death. So he fled the country, evading a security team dispatched to track him down.

He's since settled in South Korea, where he works for New Focus International, a media outlet that produces stories about what's really going on inside North Korea. Kim Jong-un's State Security department has threatened to destroy it, but Jang says he already faced his worst fears when he escaped.

"In this country of freedom there won't be any distress, frustration or fear greater than that — of that I'm confident," he said.