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[Fake News from Pyongyang! How North Korea is Using the Internet](#)

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By **Robert R. King**

“Fake News” from Pyongyang is hardly new news, but the self-isolated country is now taking a more aggressive and creative approach in its effort to discredit information about the regime that circulates where there is greater access to information beyond the borders of the hermit kingdom. In addition to the turgid denunciations from KCNA (Korea Central News Agency), a more sophisticated and creative approach has emerged recently in the effort to deny claims that the North Korean regime finds offensive.

This latest show of creativity comes in response to media reports about food shortages in the North. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) [appealed](#) to UN member countries for \$10 million in assistance to help 513,000 food-insecure North Koreans. The FAO said that the international coronavirus pandemic has increased pressure on the North’s always precarious food supply.

Press Reports on Food Shortages

In late April [reports](#) appeared that people in Pyongyang were “panic buying” food staples and causing empty store shelves in the capital city. These reports were widely [circulated](#). U.S. Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) said, “There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea,” and he added that the United States is closely watching the food situation there.

Reports of food shortages in North Korea are frequent. Since the horrific famine of the 1990s, North Korea has relied on United Nations, other international agencies, and many individual countries to provide food assistance over the last two decades.

North Korea is in an awkward position. On the one hand there is, in fact, a significant shortfall in food production, in part because of limited arable land but more significantly as a result of the government focusing resources on maintaining an enormous military and developing nuclear weapons and missiles. Providing luxuries for Kim Jong-un and the leadership elite is also drains resources. Economic management, focused on maintaining regime control, does not provide needed incentives to encourage greater food output, efficiency, and distribution.

On the other hand, the North wants to be considered an advanced developed nation. Its legitimacy is based on the claim that it has a superior social and economic system. Particularly in its competition with South Korea to claim that it is the “true” Korea, the North has difficulty maintaining its reputation. South Korea’s [per capita Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\)](#) is 23 times greater per person than North Korea’s. South Korea is ranked 14th largest economy in the world in terms of [total GDP](#), while North Korea with half the population of the South is ranked 118th—just ahead of Georgia, Madagascar and Botswana.

Thus, North Korea faces a conflict between the need for food from outside to supplement its inadequate domestic production and the stigma of begging for aid from its wealthier allies (China and Russia) and from the international community. This inconsistency between the desire and

need for international food assistance and the wish to be seen as a sophisticated first-world country puts Pyongyang in an awkward position. Despite these contradictions, the North has taken a very interesting direction in its international media efforts

Sophisticated Social Media Information Campaign

In an effort to burnish the image of North Korea by countering the recent reports of food shortages and internal problems, a much more sophisticated campaign is underway. The North has shown some real skill in using social media to its benefit. A series of items have recently appeared on YouTube and Twitter showing a new face of North Korea propaganda.

Here are a few samples of items that have appeared recently on the internet. These pieces are well produced, there is peppy background music, the journalists who narrate the items sometime speak in English, and other North Koreans who are “interviewed” and speak all have English subtitles translating their remarks.

“True or False: Pyongyang Tour Series.” Posted April 24 (2 minutes). The narrator speaks English but comments from other individuals are in Korean with English subtitles. A pleasant young Korean woman on a Pyongyang street starts: “Today is April 24 and I am here for a reason. Recently Western media reported about DPRK’s economy, so I’m here today to check it out.” Clearly the YouTube video was aimed at countering the reports of food shortages because we then go to footage of what we are supposed to believe is a typical Pyongyang market. The grocery store has all kinds of colorfully packaged processed food products, full shelves, neat glass front cold foods storage, and we see a few well-dressed patrons shopping. Most are women. Two messages are clear—(1) everyone prefers domestic goods over imports, and (2) there are no food shortages. A shopper is asked, “Does it happen that the shop lacks of products lately?” The store clerk responds, “No, there are products popular and less popular, but we are always stocked enough.”

The appearance of the store makes the places where I shop in Palo Alto, California, and the affluent suburbs of Washington, D.C. look a bit tawdry by comparison. The women who are shopping are all smartly dressed with high-heel boots, chic coats, and stylishly coiffed hair. Although the North has no cases of COVID-19 (at least so we are told), sales clerks and customers are all wearing face masks.

“My Life in Pyongyang: Happy Lunch.” Posted May 12, 2020. (3 ½ minutes). The message of this post is that there is plenty of good food in Pyongyang. The young woman protagonist goes to lunch at the Pyongyang’s Taedonggang Seafood Restaurant. Clearly, however, this is not a place for the average North Korean, even the average person living in Pyongyang. We are told that the site of the restaurant was chosen by Kim Jong-un himself and that he also personally attended the grand opening. The restaurant is as nice as some of the best restaurants in Seoul. In the center of the main part of the restaurant is a large fish pond, where diners choose the fresh fish they want as it swims around. The young woman picks a carp. It is scooped up in a net, put in a plastic box, weighed, and then cooked for the young woman. Walking to the table, she chats with the restaurant hostess. They discuss what dishes are most popular—raw fish (sushi) and fish soup. We next see her eating carp soup with a large piece of the fish she chose. Her message: “I think I can eat to my heart’s content today.” Our narrator also notes that “I personally love to eat in this restaurant with glass tables.” On the way out she stops at the take home counter where guests can pick up crab and other prepared delicacies to take home.

“Back to Campus: Pyongyang Tour Series.” Posted April 21, 2020. (3 minutes). This vignette focuses on students returning to university and how happy they all are to be back at their studies. In addition to footage of students in class, with students and teacher wearing face masks, there were four interviews with different students, all expressing how delighted they are to be back in school. One of the students gives the key message: “Watching the news about spread of COVID-19 and watching how we are successfully preventing its inflow, I witnessed how great our socialist system is.” But the last student, who is studying English, was asked to give a greeting in English, and she ended the broadcast on a softer tone: “Hello, everybody. I’d like to send my friendly greetings to all the students around the world. And I hope from the bottom of my heart, you return to your study as soon as possible.”

“My Song from Pyongyang: Pyongyang Tour Series.” Posted April 30, 2020. (4 minutes) A young woman who is obviously a professional singer introduces her music: “I’m here today to talk about, not differences, but something in common. I know everyone’s going through a hard time now. I think this is the time we should stand together against our common enemy, the COVID-19, instead of criticizing each other or throwing some sarcasms to each other. And the fact that we are free from COVID-19 does not mean we do not see or feel the other’s pain. So I say we should fight the virus with love and trust for a peaceful and healthy world.” She then sings a slow ballad with very professional musical backup. The song is “Green Willow”—“You beautiful green willow, Always keeping your head down . . .” A subtle way of saying even though we are better off than you because we have no cases of COVID-19, we feel your pain. This approach is certainly more subtle and it may be more successful than the usual bluster and bombast that comes from the propaganda apparatchiks.

The Messages Have Official Approval

Clearly this material now being posted to YouTube and other social media has official sanction and appears to be part of a shift in tactics. Such material could not be produced without official approval. Since access to the international internet is tightly and strictly controlled in North Korea, such material would not find its way to the YouTube and Twitter without official approval. It clearly hits back on issues—food shortages, regime success in dealing with COVID-19—in a soft sell fashion, but it is also clear that this is conscious regime counter-messaging.

This is not material for domestic North Korean consumption. North Koreans do not have access to the wider internet. If it were for internal consumption, it would not be put on the internet which is not accessed in the North.

This is also not just material produced for the domestic audience on the internal intranet that was set out to a broader audience. Messages on the internal intranet would not include English speakers and English subtitles. Furthermore, the luxurious seafood restaurant and the Potemkin supermarket showing a wide variety of beautifully packaged food and the well-stocked shelves would not be shown. Average North Koreans, even those in Pyongyang, would likely be envious of the luxuries their elite enjoy.

These YouTube pieces and similar ones on Twitter are clearly intended to counter the stories of food shortages in North Korea and burnish the image of the North, but it is done in a more subtle and sophisticated way. In the past, discounting foreign press reporting usually involved a scathing response from KCNA (Korea Central News Agency), the official North Korean news agency. Reports would be delivered with vigor and bombast. This new pleasant soft sell approach reflects Pyongyang's increasing sophistication in selling itself and its image.

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