

Book Review

Nah, S., Seo, S., Kim, Y., & Jin, D. Y. (2025). *Locating North Korea in Communication Research*

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Locating North Korea in Communication Research approaches North Korea as a critical case for communication studies, emphasizing the country's significance beyond traditional political or security lenses. This volume offers a compelling and valuable contribution to the field by uncovering the complexities of North Korean media, highlighting how communication functions under one of the world's most closed and controlled regimes. The volume is structured into three thematic sections: News Media, Digital Technology, and Popular Culture, each offering distinct analytical perspectives. Contributors examine how institutional portrayals, cultural narratives, and digital technologies shape and are shaped by North Korea's unique sociopolitical environment. Central to the book is the question: "Why does North Korea matter to communication scholars, and how can its study enrich the field?"

The introduction situates North Korea's media system within the broader historical trajectory of Cold War politics and ongoing geopolitical shifts. By emphasizing the regime's long-standing isolation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the editors underscore how these conditions have deepened the state's control over information flows. At the same time, the volume foregrounds the enduring human impulse to communicate, positioning North Korea as a unique but critical site for understanding how media systems function under authoritarian constraints. This framing offers a compelling entry point into broader theoretical questions about media, power, and resistance in closed societies.

While previous studies have focused primarily on South Korean news media coverage of North Korea (Ha & Lee, 2012; Park, 2012; Park et al., 2022), this volume adopts a multi-dimensional perspective, examining news media coverage, media literacy education, child bloggers, and popular culture. These topics are explored through diverse

methodological approaches, including discourse analysis, archival research, interviews, and comparative case studies. The book illustrates how global forces intersect with localized practices to shape media production and consumption within the country. These insights not only advance the field of communication research but also provide a deeper understanding of North Korean society through the lens of media theory, digital change, and cultural expression.

The first section of the volume interrogates how North Korea is constructed in global discourse, focusing on the roles of U.S. and Chinese media and evolving journalistic practices. Together, these chapters explore how media systems shape, constrain, and politicize public understanding of North Korea, often filtering it through the lenses of state interests and ideological frameworks.

One major theme is the personalization and dramatization of diplomacy. The first chapter shows how U.S. media coverage of the 2018 and 2019 North Korea–U.S. summits centered on the eccentric personas of Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, casting the events as a “madmen” game and obscuring deeper geopolitical stakes. This reflects a long-standing “us-versus-them” framing (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and a broader media logic that favors sensational narratives over structural analysis. Computational discourse analysis (Park et al., 2022) offers timely methodological tools for future studies, enabling researchers to move beyond anecdotal critique.

Meanwhile, Chinese media portrayals offer a contrasting strategic logic. As the second chapter shows, Chinese coverage has shifted from fraternal solidarity to a more distanced and calculated framing of North Korea. This shift parallels China’s rise as a regional hegemon and reflects its use of state media as both a diplomatic tool and a mechanism for domestic ideological control. With China becoming the dominant gatekeeper of North Korean information, especially as South Korea’s role wanes, questions of interpretive bias and media opacity come to the forefront.

The third chapter deepens this conversation by exploring the transformation of journalistic practices over time. From reliance on official statements to the use of satellite imagery and defector testimony, journalists are developing new strategies to penetrate North Korea’s opacity. However, this shift also introduces ethical challenges, such as compensating defectors for information. Importantly, the chapter highlights how international media ecosystems, including collaborations with Russia and China, can amplify or constrain North Korean narratives. Hinck and Cooley (2020) demonstrate that during the 2017–2018 nuclear crisis, North Korea’s messaging aligned with Chinese and Russian domestic agendas, showing how authoritarian media systems selectively absorb and elevate external narratives.

Taken together, these chapters illustrate how North Korea is not just reported on but is framed, filtered, and fabricated according to external strategic interests. They also reveal the methodological and ethical dilemmas involved in studying a country so thoroughly mediated by others. The next step for research might involve comparative computational studies of narrative convergence across media systems, as well as a deeper inquiry into the role of intermediary actors (journalists, defectors, diplomats) in shaping what the world sees in North Korea.

The second section shifts from global news narratives to the ways digital media reshape both the internal fabric of North Korean society and the regime’s international image. Across these chapters, a central theme emerges: how technology and mediated representation function as tools of both survival and soft power in a tightly controlled state.

The fourth chapter offers a rare window into North Korea’s informal economy through mobile phone usage. Since the late 2000s, mobile phones, despite being state-monitored via the Koryolink network, have become essential for coordinating black-market activity. The concept of the “trust

network” captures how users build private, secure circles to exchange information and goods under conditions of high risk. Based on defector interviews, the chapter shows how mobile communication both empowers economic self-sufficiency and reinforces the social bonds necessary for survival under authoritarianism. A future project could explore a potential data source for quantifying the financial implications of mobile phone use, thereby enriching the study’s empirical scope (Park, 2019).

Whereas the fourth chapter focuses on internal communication, the fifth and sixth chapters explore how North Korea is visually constructed and projected through media. The fifth chapter uses media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Kim, 2020) to analyze how each Korean capital, Seoul and Pyongyang, is symbolically depicted in the other’s media. These urban representations serve ideological functions: Pyongyang appears in South Korean media as impoverished or exotic, while Seoul is portrayed in North Korean outlets as morally bankrupt. Yet, moments of unexpected empathy and admiration, such as North Korea’s obsessive critiques of Seoul’s modernity, reveal the complexities of mediated identity construction. The chapter expands North Korean media studies beyond traditional news by incorporating symbolic and semiotic analysis and calls for updated studies of inter-Korean programs like *North Window* and *Unification Observatory*, building on Park (2012).

The sixth chapter investigates North Korea’s emerging digital propaganda, particularly through child YouTubers showcasing life in Pyongyang. These polished vlogs, filled with symbols of consumer culture like Macs and Nikes, serve to humanize the regime and align it with global media trends. Yet, the tension between scripted presentation and the appearance of authenticity is central to the chapter’s critique. Drawing on theories of desire and authenticity, the authors argue that these clips represent a shift from blunt state-controlled messaging to influencer-style

soft power. Building on Ha and Lee (2012), who examined how South Korean media portray North Koreans based on political context, the chapter encourages comparative research on visual narratives in contemporary digital platforms.

Collectively, these chapters reveal how digital technologies are double-edged: they enable both subtle resistance at the grassroots level and sophisticated propaganda on the global stage. They also challenge the notion of North Korea as technologically backward, showing how the regime and its citizens adapt and repurpose media for survival, influence, and perception management.

The third section explores North Korea from the ground up, offering a human-centered and historical view of its media through the lenses of resettler experience, creative production, and cinematic evolution. These chapters underscore that North Korea’s cultural and media output, while state-controlled, is neither static nor monolithic. Instead, it reflects continuous shifts shaped by ideology, external influence, and the lived realities of its people.

Chapter seven brings the voices of North Korean resettlers to the fore, comparing their media experiences across a ten-year span. Drawing on interviews from the early 2010s and a decade later, the study reveals how access to smuggled content, like USB drives with foreign dramas, and the expansion of South Korea’s digital literacy programs have transformed resettlers’ adaptation journeys. Those arriving in 2020 were not only more digitally literate but also more critical consumers of media, having often encountered foreign content before defection. Unlike Park et al. (2022) who focused on how South Korean media frame resettlers, this chapter centers on resettlers’ own perspectives. It also offers practical guidance for educators and policymakers, advocating for digital literacy initiatives that address misinformation and online hate speech toward North Korean resettlers (Cheong, 2025).

Chapters eight and nine take a historical approach, exploring how North Korean cinema has been shaped by both external coercion and internal ideological change. Chapter eight focuses on the remarkable case of South Korean director Shin Sang-ok, who was abducted by North Korea in 1978 and directed films under Kim Jong-il's supervision. Analyzing works such as *Pulgasari* (1985), the chapter illustrates how Shin's involvement brought cinematic innovation to North Korea's propaganda machinery, introducing genre diversity, professional production quality, and subtle shifts in messaging. Shin's films represent moments where transnational influence disrupted North Korea's otherwise scripted cultural apparatus (Kim, 2010).

In contrast, chapter nine turns to the domestically produced film *The Path to Awakening* (1965) to trace a pivotal moment in North Korean cinema. Emerging as Kim Il-sung consolidated a distinct national ideology, the film marks a departure from Soviet-style socialist realism and toward Juche-driven narratives celebrating ideological awakening and socialist construction. Through close textual analysis, the author shows how the film exemplifies the regime's use of cinema to shape public consciousness, transforming art into a vehicle for cultivating ideal citizens.

Together, these chapters complicate dominant assumptions about North Korean culture by foregrounding agency, adaptation, and aesthetic evolution. Whether through resettlers learning to decode a new media environment or through films that reveal both control and creativity, this section emphasizes that North Korea's cultural outputs reflect a dynamic interplay of internal priorities and external forces.

In sum, *Locating North Korea in Communication Research* provides a comprehensive examination of North Korean media and communication practices. Its chapters address a wide range of topics, from portrayals in U.S. and Chinese news media to internal communication under authoritarian constraints to transnational flows

of imagery and narrative through YouTube vlogs, cinematic works, and defectors' media engagement. Authored by scholars from fields such as journalism, communication, and film studies, this volume adopts a multi-dimensional perspective supported by diverse methodological approaches. This interdisciplinary and methodological breadth is one of the book's key strengths, enabling a deeper understanding of how communication functions within one of the world's most tightly controlled media systems. Its originality, empirical depth, and analytical clarity establish it as a foundational contribution to North Korean media and communication scholarship.

This volume is tailored toward an academic readership, including scholars in communication, media, journalism, East Asian studies, and political communication. The collection of chapters is well-suited for use in university classrooms, particularly in upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses focused on North Korean media and communication. Notably, its comprehensive scope can also appeal to general audiences interested in North Korean media cultures. Beyond the classroom, the volume's multifaceted analyses, spanning news media, popular culture, and digital technology, offer valuable perspectives for journalists, educators, and policy analysts engaged with North Korean issues.

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