

Latest Report on Digital and IT Conditions in North Korea

<PART3> Will changes to digital and IT consumption change North Korean society?

(Commentary by ISHIMARU Jiro)

During the political changes of the “Arab Spring” that swept through Middle Eastern countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011, the Internet and mobile phones played an important role in the organization of rallies. In the Middle East then, as in North Korea now, secret police typically monitored the peoples’ actions, and freedom of public speech was limited. The tough clampdown on protestors in the Middle East is similar to the North Korean government’s actions. This impacts the question whether the proliferation of IT and digital devices in North Korea will lead to future changes in the society, as it did in the Middle East. I would like to consider this topic in the final section of this article.

The continuing influx of external information

Information from the outside world is slowly but surely trickling into North Korea. In the latter half of the 1990’s, during the Arduous March (a period marked by economic failure and a food crisis), a large number of North Korean refugees fled to China. There is a world of difference between the level of information possessed by defectors at that time and today. At that time, many people believed the authorities’ propaganda that South Korean society was being exploited by American imperialism, its people were poverty-stricken and its cities were over-run with beggars collecting empty cans. Now, fifteen years later, even junior high school students know that the standard of living in South Korea is on par with that of other developed countries, and that China, which previously had been a strong advocate of communism, has achieved prosperity by implementing policies of reform and openness. Many young people living in cities keep up to date on the names of famous South Korean actors and popular South Korean songs. Secrets about the late Kim Jong-il’s family are also becoming more widely known. For example, many recent defectors from North Korea know that the eldest son, Jong-nam, is living in China, or that his mother is the North Korean actress Song Hye-rim, or that Jong-un is Kim Jong-il’s third son. Our reporter Kim Dong-cheol commented on the subject.

“I was surprised when a friend of mine who has never been to China mentioned to me that Kim Jong-il’s personal chef, Kenji Fujimoto, ran away to Japan.”

The primary sources of outside information for North Koreans include the following: word of mouth from people who have defected to China but been repatriated; VCDs-of South Korean TV shows or movies; Radio Free Asia (short-wave) radio broadcasts by an American non-profit organization; Voice of America (medium-wave) radio broadcast by the American government; and radio broadcasts in Korean from the perimeter of China.

Radios must be registered, and the tuners are fixed to specific frequencies, yet the number of people who buy radios from unofficial sources and secretly listen to unsanctioned radio programs has increased. Although it is some distance from the border, South Korean TV broadcasts can be viewed clearly around Hamhung in South Hamkyung Province. In addition, Chinese-made portable TVs have recently become popular, and can be used to watch South Korean TV broadcasts at locations close to the border, such as South Hwanghae Province. Mobile phones that connect to Chinese carriers have also been smuggled in to North Korea and provide a source of outside information.



A young woman with mobile phone.
Moranbong Disitrect, Pyongyang. June.2011(by Gu Gwang-ho) (C)ASIAPRESS

The spread of digital media is irreversible

The digitization of media was spearheaded by video. As a result of the government’s efforts to improve the country through the digitization of video, VHS video tapes were replaced with VCDs in 2002. But this led to an influx of outside information. Pirated versions of South Korean and foreign TV shows and were smuggled across the Chinese border and then copied inside North Korea. From there they were distributed through the distribution network of *jangmadang*, and were soon being enjoyed by many ordinary citizens. It goes without saying that even with strict regulations, it is easy for individuals to copy and distribute digital images and videos when compared with previous forms of media. By promoting the digitization of images and

videos, the regime has made itself vulnerable to the proliferation of information dangerous to itself, through South Korean digital information. The government is heavily cracking down on South Korean TV shows as “impure media,” yet it is not making attempts to stop the use of digital media. The images and videos shown to the people by the regime are digitally created, and it is impossible for the regime to reverse this trend.

The individual ownership of mobile phones and computers is also impossible to reverse. In addition, the fees from almost 1 million mobile phones have become an important source of foreign hard currency for the government. If the mobile phone industry can recover the initial investment capital, then, as the number of subscribers increases, so too will its profits. According to statements by Orascom, the cumulative revenue from Koryolink by September 2011 had surpassed 100 million dollars. Due to the regime’s desperate need for foreign currency, short of serious social disruption the government will not be able to abandon the mobile phone industry.

New endeavors by the people

Even in the isolationist North Korean society, we are able to say that compared with before, a variety of outside information now flows into the country. The current problem is how to spread the information within the country. Allowing access to the Internet does not seem likely at this time. But there is a movement within some regions in North Korea to look for new methods of using IT devices. We previously spoke about the large-scale practice of illegally using someone else’s name to register your mobile phone. When our internal reporters have conversations that would be detrimental to them if eavesdropped on, they do not use the mobile phones officially registered to them but instead use mobile phones registered under borrowed names. Others have begun sending these illegally registered mobile phones to people in China, and are using them to make international phone calls. Due to heavy crackdowns on mobile phones that connect to Chinese operators, sending phones that connect to the North Korean operator is being used as an alternative way to maintain communications with those in China. Although communications can only be made with people near the North Korean border, this is a relatively safe way to have open communications with people in China. In addition, some have begun to modify their mobile phones. “IT Fever” is taking hold in North Korea, and secret businesses that modify SIM cards or the mobile phones

themselves have begun to appear. They are experimenting with modifications that make it difficult to identify the user, or modifying foreign mobile phones to run over the North Korean network. By modifying their phones with parts from phones connected to Chinese operators, they are able to make international phone calls. The Rimjin-gang editors are constantly exchanging ideas with our partners in North Korea about new ways to use IT devices. These ideas cannot be disclosed for security reasons. Suffice it to say that there are a few new ideas around and we look forward to their use in the future.

Possible use as tools for social change

The authorities in North Korea have, over a long period of time, kept the citizens thoroughly divided. In every corner of the country, a system of mutual surveillance and reporting by and on citizens is in place. From the time they are in primary school, children are required to participate in a structured life. Private class gatherings among classmates are forbidden, and even the clan gatherings that North Koreans attach great importance to are not allowed. Being accused of a political offence also causes trouble for family and relatives. There are no signs of this system being relaxed soon.

It is often questioned why North Korea has no demonstrations, no riots, and no coup d'état. There are many reasons but the simple answer is that the people have lived under the system described above where they have been divided and controlled for a long time. An uprising cannot occur without alliance. In North Korea, even consultation with your neighbors is not allowed.

The chances of the Internet and mobile phones being used to create political change in North Korea in the near future, as has happened in the Middle East, are very small. However, when looking at the big picture, the new IT and digital technology has allowed ordinary citizens access to media and methods of communications that were impossible until now. Over the last ten years, we have seen small holes forming in the walls of the most isolationist country in the world, resulting from the increase in VCDs, computers, and digital technology.

The authorities in North Korea are aware of this digital threat. Despite the intense efforts to stop it and the introduction of strict regulations and penalties, they are unable to eradicate the illegal spread of information using these digital technologies. One reason for this is that the

spread of the information is tied to market forces. In contrast to the motivations of workers at state-run organizations, more and more people are driven to enter the IT market by the desire for personal economic gain. This is not easily controlled with regulations. The people's curiosity and desire for more information drive market demand. The proliferation of VCDs, as discussed earlier, is a typical example.

The second reason this situation will be difficult to stop stems from government employees' economic hardship and the resulting corruption. The monthly salary of a policeman or bureaucrat is only enough to buy about one kilogram of rice. Officials cannot live without additional money from bribes. The economic failings of the socialist system are weakening the regime's control over society, and it is unable to stop the rising threat from digital technology.

We predict that in the future, Kim Jong-un will continue to fight against threats to the regime that come from the proliferation of digital technology. The direction the regime chooses will be the opposite of policy of reform and openness. It will be extremely difficult for North Korea to overcome the current economic difficulties, and this will result in further weakening of the regime. Within North Korea, room for the use of digital media will continue to grow. North Korea is unable to fight off the continuing worldwide digital revolution. The threat to the regime from digital technology will continue to increase over time, and it is possible that one day it will grow to challenge the new regime.

PROFILE:

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Ishimaru was born in 1962 in Osaka, Japan. He is the Osaka office representative for ASIAPRESS. He studied abroad in Seoul for two and a half years and then in '93 traversed the entire 1400 kilometer China-North Korean border. He has made reports from inside North Korea three times, and has been to the border region more than eighty times. Up to now he has interviewed more than 800 North Koreans. Ishimaru is the publisher and chief editor of Rimjin-gang

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