An in-depth look at how western news media reports on North Korea and the consequences of making light of a valid threat.

Enrique J Nusi II
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North Korea’s state-run Korean Central News Agency shows a penchant for exaggeration: regular exaltations of leader Kim Jong-un and overblown technological achievements, including a false claim to an AIDS vaccine (Moon, 2016), are part of the standard media fare which has led to a growing obsession in western media over the antics of the so-called hermit kingdom, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea—with an increasingly hostile atmosphere settling over east Asia, it’s more important than ever to ensure that people have access to verifiably correct information. When respectable news outlets run North Korea stories as humorous fluff pieces instead of analyzing the meaning and intent behind the DPRK’s sometimes ludicrous statements, it cheapens the threat posed by Kim and his nuclear regime and further erodes public trust in the news media, leaving all but the most dedicated Korea watchers ignorant of a very real threat.

The Kiringul case

Kiringul’s rediscovery typifies this treatment—the KCNA reported in November 2012 that the North Korean government had “reconfirmed” the burial site of an ancient king’s horse, called Kiringul or Kirin’s Grotto. Kirin’s Grotto became “Unicorn Lair” due to a historical translation, possibly derived from imaginative descriptions of rhinoceroses that both east and west sent home during antiquity (Simon, 2015). Even millennia after, the misunderstanding persists—The Guardian ran a piece that same month prominently featuring the snarky title, “Unicorn lair ‘discovered’ in North Korea,” and an equally snarky
graphic, shown in Figure 1. The article itself matter-of-factly summarized the original KCNA report, ending with a parallel to another embarrassing incident in which a Chinese Communist Party newspaper “…hailed a report by The Onion naming… Kim Jong-un as the sexiest man alive” (Quinn, 2012, para. 8) (it should be noted that the original North Korean report on Kiringul is no longer available on the KCNA website).

The story made its way to the pages of the Huffington Post, US News, and even Time, who, while crafting a well-written article, ran the story with the egregiously clickbait-worthy title, “Unicorns’ existence proven, says North Korea” (Boehler, 2012). Though The Guardian amended its article on 5 December to reflect the unintentional misinformation (Pidd, 2012), the organization did so only after io9 ran a story on 1 December refuting the original, giving a much more detailed rendition of the account (Davis, 2012).

The North Korean news cycle

Broken down into its base parts, the Kiringul incident follows a pattern of action that tends to result in poorly-disseminated information making it into the news:

1) The KCNA digs up a story that will further legitimize the regime of Kim Jong-un (Boehler, 2012), Kiringul in this instance.

2) Government officials may embellish and sanitize stories to fit the Korean Workers Party narrative before translating reports locally and releasing them online, as the KCNA did by claiming Kiringul’s proximity with Pyongyang as proof that it had always been Korea’s capital (Davis, 2012).
3) Unless involving a kinetic provocation, international news outlets may run a KCNA story out of context to demonstrate North Korea’s enmity or incompetence in a humorous way, as *The Guardian* did by echoing the most outlandish part of the Kiringul story.

It is a near-certainty that this is the process at work when a humorous North Korea story airs on American or European news, and while North Korea may shoulder some of the burden for the ridicule it faces—a shining example is a poorly-edited propaganda video (see Figure 2) that stole the main theme music from Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (The Telegraph, 2013)—readers should remain skeptical of any story that purports to come from North Korea.

![Figure 2 North Korea depicts President Barack Obama on fire](image)

You should feel cheated

What do the experts say?

Ethically, *The Guardian* shirked its duty to report the Kiringul story factually, likely to benefit from increased web traffic that a provocative title generates. In her analysis of Józef Bocheński’s research into deontic authority, Anna Brożek (2013) differentiates deontic and epistemic authority. Simply put, deontic authority stems from rigid definitions of duty, as Bocheński (1965) famously illustrates—a Major issues a lawful order to a Lieutenant. Military duty dictates that a subordinate must obey a superior, so the Major represents a deontic authority. Conversely, an epistemic authority acts as an expert (Brożek uses the word “infallible”) on a
given matter which Bocheński, now painting the Major as less intelligent than the Lieutenant, again illustrates—while the Lieutenant must accept the major’s lawful order, he does not have to accept any sentence the Major issues on the Lieutenant’s area of subject matter expertise—a teacher-student relationship serves as a more practical example of epistemic authority.

Globally, this type of incident exemplifies realism theory at work in international relations with respect specifically to soft power. Joseph Nye (2004), the political scientist who developed the concept of soft power, likens its integration into strategic thinking to playing a game of three-dimensional chess: where focusing solely on hard (military) power limits an actor to only a single chess board, incorporating soft (cultural) power gives states a top board, an extra facet with which to project influence. Instead of dropping incendiary bombs, news outlets can drop bombs of the metaphorical variety to exert influence, with, whether intentional or not, the effect appearing proportional a source’s reach.

"Water is the softest thing, yet it can penetrate mountains and earth. This shows clearly the principle of softness overcoming hardness.”
-Lao Tzu

Applying expertise to mediocrity pt. 1

The extraordinary trust placed in these organizations means that a single poorly-researched article can have wide-ranging consequences; in this case, it was embarrassment on both sides and a number of amended articles. The case for misreporting an odd-yet-far-reaching policy change in the DPRK or a new development in its weapons program may be far more grave—failure to research a story in accordance with strict ethical standards may leave both citizens and leadership unable to make an informed judgement, and inflammatory reporting on exaggerated cruelty
(though cruelty in the DPRK should not be understated) may serve to fan the flames of hatred, perhaps to the benefit of hawkish sorts who prey on opportunities like public outrage to build a case for military intervention in place of diplomacy.

Eyewitness Media Hub cofounder Sam Dubberly ruminates briefly on the use of eyewitness content by news organizations, stating the need for them “to remember they have a duty of care towards those whose content they use” (Cooper, 2015, para. 7). The Guardian’s broad application of the KCNA’s original Kiringul story demonstrated a lackadaisical effort to apply these ethics to their process; the name “Unicorn Lair” should have raised a plethora of eyebrows and launched a great deal of research into the matter. Instead, the organization went with the most outlandish analysis of the story based on its awkwardly-translated title and let sensationalism take the reins. This irresponsible method of fact-reporting brings up the question of duty—while broad, the deontological authority over news organizations is truth. Societal norms dictate that news organizations must report the news factually, as deviations from the norm will start to erode trust.

The implications of The Guardian’s reporting on Kiringul were widespread at the outset. As the second section of this paper discusses, news articles embellished their titles more with each “share” of the original until the io9 article debunking the claim had gained wide enough readership to result in retractions and amendments. When news organizations report on these types of sensational stories though, many people do listen, and not just in the west—six of the top 10 news sites in the world are western-based (Alexa, 2017), and the media disseminates globally whatever they pass through their editorial filter.
Viewed through deontological-realist optics, *The Guardian* wielded tremendous soft power through its garnered trust, and therefore had a duty to exercise that power with caution. When a trusted source violates this social contract for a laugh, the world sees this—North Korea is often the butt of jokes in global affairs, but it is also a nuclear state with uncertain policy goals which news outlets should be digging hard to find instead of picking on the weakest kid on the world playground. People should care more about how the media portrays the DPRK not for fear of retaliation by the North, but, so when elections roll around or when Kim strikes, no one can say the news is crying wolf.

**Applying expertise to mediocrity pt. 2**

The *io9* article “No, the North Korean government did not claim it found evidence of unicorns,” written by Lauren Davis (2012), is demonstrative of a well-researched version of the Kiringul story—admittedly, this paper derives a number of sources from searches of key terms found in the article. To start, the article introduced itself as a correction to the earlier “Unicorn Lair” account, then explained how the mistake may have come about through a loose association and a shaky translation before diving into the actual problem with North Korea’s discovery. The author used expert testimony from Columbia University PhD candidate Sixiang Wang to corroborate elements of North Korea’s story to reality, but ultimately questioned the authenticity of Pyongyang’s discovery. The author then cited research from Korean archaeologist Jeon Kwan Su to expand on Wang’s thought, noting that Kiringul may have been “an old name applied to a much newer site” (Davis, 2012, para. 6).

In researching the story, Davis’ attention to detail shines through—not only is her article longer and more detailed at 773 words, but also serves to entertain much more than *The Guardian’s*
250-word article, title notwithstanding. The images of Kiringul itself, not shown in the more sensational reports, contextualize a particularly confusing detail of the original report, that the words “Unicorn Lair” had been written on a giant stone rectangle, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. The fusion of expert resources, accurate imagery, and obsessive analysis gives readers a polished report that not only reflects the event as it actually was, but also raises valid, previously-unasked questions of North Korea’s “discovery” that are critical in nature rather than comical—when presenting findings on a topic as unknowable as North Korea, the funniest explanations are usually the easiest ones, while the correct explanations take time to develop due to how tightly the DPRK controls information leaving the reclusive state: Davis took the latter path, and people are better informed as a result.

What It All Means

The dangers of media misrepresentation of facts may not be readily apparent to the casual observer, but when accurate information shifts from a utility to a commodity, problems of credibility arise parallel to those of integrity and leave everyone less informed as a result—it may be fun to chuckle at some of North Korea’s claims to exotic achievements, but it has a sedative effect on media consumers who begin to see the DPRK as so impotent that there is no
possible way “those people” could have an effect on any part of the world: this is where the danger lies.

There are never any simple answers when it comes to studying North Korea. Boiling down any question to a “yes or no” conclusion is notoriously difficult, and the case of Kiringul is no exception—any news out of the DPRK goes through its own media filter, so confirming a story is bound to cause headaches. Still, the failure of mainstream news outlets to do their duty by preforming even the most perfunctory research into the story is both lazy and irresponsible in an era where uncertainty has the potential to create strife a world away. The far-reaching influence of these organizations alone should inspire them to stay a cut above other researchers, but the pressure to produce news around the clock combined with the world’s fascination with North Korea’s more sensational shenanigans has led to the current paradigm in DPRK news research where news is pushed out to increase views rather than to inform the public.
References


Figure 1 retrieved from:

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/30/unicorn-lair-discovered-north-korea

Figure 2 retrieved from:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKC0vB5PfNY (0:59)

Figure 3 retrieved from:


Figure 4 retrieved from: