



Published on *Freedom House* (<https://freedomhouse.org>)

[Home](#) > North Korea

## North Korea

**Country:**

North Korea

**Year:**

2016

**Press Freedom Status:**

Not Free

**PFS Score:**

97

**Legal Environment:**

30

**Political Environment:**

38

**Economic Environment:**

29

### Overview

North Korea remained one of the most repressive media environments in the world in 2015. The state-controlled domestic media produce propaganda with the aim of ensuring absolute loyalty to Kim Jong-un, who assumed the country's leadership after the death of his father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011. Access to foreign and independent media is tightly restricted.

### Key Developments

- The U.S. government imposed additional economic sanctions on North Korea in early 2015 in response to a 2014 cyberattack on Sony Pictures Entertainment, which had released a satirical movie, *The Interview*, that centered on a fictional U.S. Central Intelligence Agency attempt to assassinate Kim.
- In March, North Korea lifted a ban on foreign tour groups and ended an intensive quarantine procedure for all arriving travelers, both of which had been imposed the previous year in response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.
- In June, the government barred foreign diplomats in the country from possessing any media content that is critical of the leadership.

**Legal Environment: 30 / 30**

Although the constitution theoretically guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press, all reporting that is not sanctioned by the government is subject to severe restrictions in practice. Under the penal code, listening to unauthorized foreign broadcasts and possessing dissident publications are considered “crimes against the state” that carry serious punishments, including hard labor, prison sentences, and the death penalty. North Koreans are often interrogated or arrested for speaking critically about the government; they also face arrest for possessing or watching black-market recordings of television programs.

The one-party regime rigorously limits the ability of North Korean people and foreign journalists to access internal information about state entities, and attempts to monitor and regulate all forms of communication. All domestic journalists are members of the ruling Korean Workers’ Party (KWP).

**Political Environment: 38 / 40**

North Korea’s domestic media outlets serve as propaganda mouthpieces for the regime. In 2007, a Japanese journalist and several North Korean refugees launched *Rimjingang*, the first newsmagazine to be based on independent reporting from inside the country. The reporting is conducted by specially trained North Koreans—most of them refugees living along the border with China—who agreed to go back into the country and operate as undercover journalists. As of late 2015, there were approximately 10 reporters working with *Rimjingang* from inside North Korea, but they were able to work only intermittently due to security concerns. A number of other news outlets based outside the country, including *Daily NK*, also provide reporting about North Korea and rely to some extent on sources based inside the country. Although reports from these outlets are easily accessible to people outside North Korea, most citizens within the country still rely primarily on state-owned broadcasters for news.

Foreigners based in embassies or working for international organizations in Pyongyang have historically enjoyed greater privileges and access to information than the local population. However, in June 2015, the government issued an ordinance forbidding foreign diplomats from possessing of any media critical of Kim Jong-un or the regime.

In recent years there has been an increase in the flow of news and information into the country via foreign radio stations and organizations that send multimedia content across the border. For example, several Seoul-based radio stations run mainly by North Korean refugees, such as Free North Korea Radio and Radio Free Chosun, have broadcast to North Korea since the mid-2000s. According to surveys of North Korean defectors by the North Korean Human Rights Database Center, a growing number of North Koreans have listened to foreign radio in recent years. Smuggled foreign DVDs have also become an important source of information about life outside North Korea. Although televisions are required to be tuned to official channels, nearly one-third of television viewers—mainly those living along the Chinese and South Korean borders—reported having accessed

foreign television broadcasts, according to a 2012 research report by InterMedia. The use of USB flash drives smuggled from China has similarly raised the volume of outside information in the country. Although authorities actively track and punish citizens found with unauthorized media content, some reports have indicated that enforcement is becoming less pervasive, as the availability of such materials has increased and the willingness of North Koreans to inform on one another has eroded.

Official North Korean media generally portray dissidents and foreign journalists as liars attempting to destabilize the government. Authorities allow very few foreign journalists to report from the country and curtail their ability to gather information by preventing them from freely talking to residents and constantly monitoring their movements. The regime does on occasion invite foreign journalists, both individually and in groups, to cover festivals, parades, and other events that shed a favorable light on the state. Access for foreigners improved somewhat in March 2015, when North Korea lifted a tour-group ban and strict quarantine rules it had imposed in 2014 in an effort to prevent the Ebola virus from reaching the country. All arriving travelers, including North Koreans, had been subject to a strict 21-day quarantine.

Monitoring of foreigners apparently extends even to those who visit the website of the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). In January 2015, internet security researchers reported that the site had been encoded with malicious software designed to infect users' computers.

### **Economic Environment: 29 / 30**

The state-owned KCNA supplies content to the country's 12 main newspapers, 20 periodicals, and broadcasters such as the KWP's Korean Central TV and Korean Central Broadcasting Station radio outlet. *Rodong Sinmun* is the newspaper of the KWP. In 2012, the Associated Press (AP) was allowed to establish its first full-time and all-format news bureau in the country. It is located inside the headquarters of the KCNA in Pyongyang, managed from outside the country, and staffed by two resident North Koreans—a reporter and a photographer. While the bureau's presence allows visiting journalists to work in the country on a regular basis and has increased the flow of information to the outside world, the AP is forced to operate under tight restrictions, and the local population does not have direct access to its reporting.

Other foreign news organizations have also opened offices in recent years, including Russia's RIA Novosti, Japan's Kyodo News, and China's Xinhua News Agency. In November 2015, Agence France-Presse (AFP) chairman Emmanuel Hoog indicated that his news agency would open a bureau office in Pyongyang in the coming months, though it had yet to do so at year's end.

There are no accurate statistics measuring the rate of internet penetration in the country. Global internet access is still limited to a handful of high-level officials who have received state approval, though increasing numbers of academic scientists and students are also permitted controlled internet access. Ordinary citizens are granted access only to a national intranet that does not link to foreign sites. The Korea Computer Center, a government information-technology research center, controls the information that can be

downloaded from the intranet. As personal computers are uncommon in homes, most access occurs via terminals in libraries or offices.

North Korea's connection to the global internet was reportedly cut off for a short time in December 2014, days after the U.S. government accused North Korea of hacking into Sony Pictures Entertainment in retaliation for its North Korea-themed satirical film, *The Interview*. The situation was unusual for the country, whose state-operated links to the internet run through China, raising questions about a possible cyberattack or a reprisal by the U.S. government. Washington imposed new sanctions on North Korea over the Sony hacking in January 2015.

The online presence of North Korean official media has increased in recent years. *Rodong Sinmun* launched a new website in 2011, with its English-language site following within a year. The KCNA website has improved since debuting in 2010, and North Korea maintains YouTube and Twitter accounts under the name Uriminzokkiri (Our Nation). The website of the Korean Friendship Association, a major channel for promoting propaganda abroad, offers multimedia content and includes links to major social-media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Beginning in 2013, North Korea allowed foreigners visiting or living in the country access to the internet from their mobile devices via a 3G network run by Koryolink. Reporters for the AP and Xinhua in North Korea were some of the first foreigners to use the service. The decision regarding the mobile internet service came shortly after North Korea began allowing foreigners to bring their own mobile phones into the country to use with Koryolink SIM cards. In 2015, Orascom Telecom and Media Technology, an Egyptian firm that owns a majority stake in Koryolink and helped establish the network, reportedly lost its control of the company following a dispute in which the government refused to allow Orascom to remove its profits from North Korea. The government had also established a new state-run carrier, Byol, to compete with Koryolink. Negotiations aimed at finding a solution to the dispute, including a possible merger of the two providers, remained stalled at year's end.

**Source URL:** <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/north-korea>