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Introducing the Great Successor: North Korean English language news coverage of Kim Jong Un 2010–2011



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ABSTRACT

How did North Korea initially frame coverage of the “Great Successor” Kim Jong Un for an international audience? This paper argues that North Korea’s daily English language news reports, while commonly dismissed as purely propaganda, provides potential insights into such framing. Through automated content analysis of daily news reports from 2010 through 2011 coupled with regression analysis, this analysis both suggests an increased focus on Kim Jong Un’s formal positions and less on his pedigree.

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1. Introduction

Little is known about Kim Jong Un who took the reins of leadership in North Korea following his father’s death in December of 2011. Prior to 2010, the youngest son of Kim Jong Il was not referenced at all in North Korea’s English language news, this despite appearing earlier in domestic propaganda. While observers continue to debate whether the new leader will usher in political and economic reforms, no rigorous analysis to date attempts to uncover how the regime framed coverage of Kim Jong Un prior to succession. Rather, most coverage prior to Kim Jong Il’s death focused on assumptions of succession instead North Korea’s own accounts. The inherent problem in such an approach is that outside scholars risk missing hints as to the future leadership in the country by dismissing North Korea’s official news as simply propaganda mouthpiece void of any other value.

In this paper I propose using of North Korea’s own news sources as a means to glean insight into how Kim Jong Un was initially positioned as successor prior to his father’s death. In particular I employ automated content analysis—computer software to analyze text—to identify patterns in North Korean rhetoric. Automated content analysis remains rare in political science, largely limited to electoral politics in Western democracies. Using daily reports from the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) for 2010 and 2011 provides a unique means to empirically measure whether references to Kim Jong Un correlate with common themes within North Korean rhetoric as well as with leaders past and present within the Hermit Kingdom. Through this analysis, the goal is to gain insight into the internal dynamics of North Korea leading up to succession as well generate expectations regarding future actions by the Great Successor.

Predicting North Korea’s collapse has been somewhat a favorite pastime of academic observers. Western predictions of North Korea’s imminent collapse emerged shortly after Kim Il Sung’s death in 1994 and the succession of Kim Jong Il. Scholars certain of the country’s impending regime change identified various rationales behind their position, but surprisingly few appeared to update such predictions as the regime muddled through the end of the Cold War, the famine referred domestically as The Arduous March, and an increasingly interconnected geopolitical environment.¹ Despite

¹ Scott Snyder commented that “if people keep on predicting that the North is about to collapse, well, one of these days they’ll be right” (Demick, 2004).

economic and political crises, not only has the regime failed to collapse, but Kim Jong Il appears to have successfully positioned his youngest son Kim Jong Un as his successor without evidence of a backlash or efforts to remove the youngest Kim short after his father's death. No evidence to date suggests that Kim Jong Un had any serious competition for this position, even if *de facto* leadership remained for awhile in the hands of experienced leadership such as his uncle Jang Sung Taek. Existing evidence suggests a near complete failure of North Korea's planned economy in the years leading up to succession, with only limited efforts at economic reform (Haggard and Noland, 2009). Scholars suggest that significant domestic wrangling was necessary to promote the youngest Kim to the helm, who apparently has no political or military experience despite propaganda claims to the counter. Yet, most analyses of North Korea rely on disconnected and often difficult to confirm pieces of evidence rather than attempt to uncover meaning within the breadth of material North Korea produces for an external audience.

While the amount of information crossing North Korean borders increases, firsthand knowledge by scholars has not made similar gains. Direct access to the country remains largely confined to humanitarian agencies or government endorsed tours, with traditional forms of fieldwork limited to interviews and surveys of refugees in China or South Korea. Speculation in the absence of empirical data unfortunately dominates much of the research, although admittedly this imbalance is slowly changing. Furthermore, insights from refugees have improved our understanding of everyday politics and economics in the country, but say little about elite politics under than anecdotal impressions of public opinion. Unlike the heyday of the Cold War where several well-connected officials in the communist world defected and thus aided American intelligence efforts, few North Korean elite have defected with the last high level defection—Hwang Jang-Yop—in 1997. Thus the ability to confirm perceived dynamics of North Korea's elite politics has advanced only marginally in recent years. A growing literature increases our knowledge of North Korea in general and especially everyday life in the country (e.g. Cha and Kang, 2003; Haggard and Noland, 2009; Hassig and Oh, 2009; Noland, 2000; Park, 2002), yet with each new challenge we are reminded of our ignorance of elite politics.

Instead of attempting to sift through existing media reports with their various ideological filters, this paper suggests using one of North Korea's own sources as a means to track rhetoric and extract meaning. Using daily news reports from the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) provides an empirical base for making claims on how Pyongyang frames coverage around Kim Jong Un and its consistency over time. Created in 1946, the KCNA is the official mouthpiece of the Korea Workers Party (KWP), with daily English news via the web since 1997. While commonly dismissed as mere propaganda, automated content analysis—using computer software to code and analyze text—provides a means to uncover patterns in such sources that the naked eye misses. Through descriptive and inferential statistics, we should gain a greater understanding of how the government intended to present Kim Jong Un to a Western audience. Admittedly using the English language KCNA reports likely differs from Korean language materials both in content and intended audience (Poneman et al., 2004). However, relying on North Korea's own words in English intended for a foreign audience avoids the difficulty of interpreting a Korean translation through an ideological lens. This source combined with automated analysis also allows for a more precise identification of shifts in rhetoric over time, rather than attempting to perceive such shifts through interpretive (and possibly idiosyncratic) reading of the news sources. In sum, automated content analysis of KCNA news reports provides a means to both empirically verify conventional wisdom as well as uncover patterns potentially missed by outside observers.

This paper will first highlight how automated content analysis can be applied to coverage of North Korea. A brief introduction to personality cults is followed by an introduction of Kim Jong Un. Next, descriptive and inferential statistics identify patterns within KCNA reports in regards to when Kim Jong Un is mentioned. Ultimately this analysis highlights that while a casual view of the KCNA reports may leave one dismissing it as undifferentiated propaganda, patterns uncovered by computer assisted content analysis suggests an intentional contrast in how Kim Jong Un is presented to a Western audience compared to domestic propaganda.

2. Applying content analysis to research on North Korea

Social scientists have applied various means as an attempt to explicitly classify parts of text and in the process decipher meaning (Berelson, 1952; Holsi, 1969). Following similar methods of historians and journalists, early works relied on human coding of individual texts. The reliance on human coding presents two serious restrictions for large content analysis projects. Hand coding is a time-intensive process, thus individual scholars either find it necessary to collaborate with others or hire assistants or reluctantly restrict the scope of the texts under analysis, for example covering a few months of news coverage or a subset of newspapers rather than all available sources for a time period of interest. Such a restriction as sampling from a body of texts creates potential selection bias concerns while not taking advantage of the full potential of the data source. In the absence of the time constraints, maintaining consistency both over time as well as among different coders further restricts content analysis efforts (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). Computer assisted content analysis overcomes both of these concerns as the amount of text that can be analyzed is limited only by computer memory requirements. Meanwhile consistency in coding is ensured through human designed dictionaries or complex algorithms that automatically classify parts of text.

While content analysis has a long history in political science, including analyses of non-democratic contexts (e.g. Mills, 1985), automated methods surprisingly remain limited largely to areas such as extracting policy positions in Western democracies (Benoit and Laver, 2008; Laver et al., 2003). A Google Scholar search of "automated content analysis" generates 827 hits, 297 of which also mention politics or political science (Date accessed 12/8/2012). Much of this literature is only from the

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