

CORRESPONDENCE

Controversy over Coverage of North Korea

The simple reality is that for most people most of the time—including far too many elected policy makers—the mainstream press in general and the elite print media in particular provide a day-to-day understanding of global challenges to U.S. interests. According to democratic press theory, there is nothing inherently problematic here. A privately owned press operating in an open society and protected from government intervention will provide a free marketplace of ideas in which a wide range of claims and evidence are made available as grist for arriving at an informed opinion. But as Hugh Gusterson ably makes clear in his well-documented essay, “Paranoid, Potbellied Stalinist Gets Nuclear Weapons: How the U.S. Print Media Cover North Korea” (15.1, March 2008, pp. 21–42), the press has provided nothing of the sort in the case of North Korea’s nuclear threat, real or imagined. Indeed, if journalism provides us with the first rough draft of history, as cliché suggests, then Gusterson gives us ample reason to regret it is the only draft most people are likely to see.

Contrary to all textbook expectations for a free press, Gusterson shows in disturbing detail how journalists from news organizations ranging from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to the Associated Press and *USA Today* have covered North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and the collapse of the Agreed Framework of the early 1990s. Press performance has been “deeply flawed” in ways, consciously or not, that stack the deck in favor of force rather than diplomacy, and reinforce the most hostile assertions of the

Bush administration about North Korean capabilities and intentions.

If journalism’s shortcomings toward North Korea were merely an unhappy exception, that might be one thing. But that isn’t the case. The elite press made exactly the same mistakes, followed precisely the same flawed path, helped produce the same dangerous body of opinion that led to support for the 2003 invasion of the senior partner in George W. Bush’s “axis of evil,” Iraq, and is doing much the same today with its junior partner, Iran. In this regard, Gusterson’s case study is especially timely and revealing.

Essentially, Gusterson’s complaint is that the press has for the most part portrayed the collapse of the Agreed Framework in one-sided fashion, as wholly the doing of a backward nation of liars, cheats, and blackmailers, an “isolated, bankrupt Hermit Kingdom,” in the words of a writer for the *New York Times*, whose leader, again in the words of the *Times*, is a “potbellied, five-foot-three paranoid Stalinist who likes to watch Daffy Duck cartoons.” Well, yes. But could there be another dimension to all of this? Gusterson thinks so, and quotes Leon Sigal, director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, who makes a persuasive argument to the effect that “In fact, it was the United States that reneged on the 1994 Agreed Framework by failing to reward North Korea’s good behavior,” and, above all, failed to move toward “full normalization of political and economic relations” as had been promised.

It is important to note that Gusterson is careful *not* to suggest that the failure of

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the framework is entirely the doing of the United States by any means (and, therefore, that the solution is for the press to “simply flip the dominant narrative upside down”). Rather, his concern is that there “is another side to the story, a side rarely provided in mainstream American press accounts.”

Absent a more nuanced understanding of the North Korean dilemma in the elite media, especially among attentive foreign policy publics, public discourse once again is skewed in ways that all too recently have been shown to be extraordinarily costly in both human and policy terms. My concern here is not so much with the effects of journalism on popular opinion as its effects on members of Congress. Given the lack of political courage that seems to characterize those in Congress most likely to challenge the use of military force if there is to be any challenge at all, the performance of the mainstream press takes on huge importance. Most elected officials simply aren't going to place themselves too far outside the acceptable boundaries of discourse, especially those enforced by the media. Put simply, had the press done a better job of investigating and challenging the claims of the administration in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Democrats might have been emboldened to think more than twice about voting for the October 2002 joint resolution authorizing use of force against Iraq, particularly given that the public at the time widely favored diplomacy over military action.

There is an interesting question in all of this that begs to be asked. If the press failed so badly, recently—and publicly—in the case of Iraq by following a script written in Washington, why are journalists so willing to do the same with North Korea (and Iran)?

In my view, such willingness has far deeper roots than the recent past and can be traced to the emergence after World War II of a national security state born of nuclearism, globalism, and corporatism that transformed American civil society in ways great and small that have never been fully grasped. One of the key institutions that underwent transformation was the press, at least in terms of how it approaches foreign affairs. Whether in the case of Iran in 1953, or Vietnam up until way too late in the game, or Latin and Central America through the 1980s, or Africa during much of its post-colonial period, the mainstream press saw the world through a Cold War prism ground in official Washington. True, the Cold War ended and the ideological and military confrontation with the Soviet Union faded from the scene, but hardly did the national security state wither away after 1989, not in terms of the military-industrial complex, the intelligence apparatus, the military alliance, the nuclear regime. And most certainly not in terms of global ambition was there a withering away. Flash forward to September 11, 2001, and you see the morphing of the national security state into the homeland security state and the kindling of a new, virulent militarism. If so much else has been affected by these extraordinary states of being, why not the institution of the press, especially as it moved from the periphery of the economy after WWII to the very center and came to see its own best interests as identical to those of the state?

The sort of compliant press described by Gusterson most likely will continue, at least until a disaster even greater than the one represented by our invasion and stubborn persistence in Iraq causes some sort of tectonic plate shift in the public and political will. Given that the Iraq experience

wasn't sufficient to the task, I hesitate to imagine what that might be.

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In his article "Paranoid, Potbellied Stalinist Gets Nuclear Weapons," Hugh Gusterson offers a useful analysis of problems with U.S. media coverage of North Korea and how that coverage should be improved. His criticisms reflect the concerns of many journalism scholars that media stereotyping can cause public bias and can eventually hamper the policy-making process.

As a former South Korean journalist who covered North Korea for several years and made a dozen reporting trips to the country, I have closely followed international media reports on North Korea, and I agree with Gusterson's claims that media coverage generally lacks diverse sourcing and often misses important context. One of the major problems is the media's heavy reliance on government sources. I have done extensive research in this area, and my content analysis of U.S. and South Korean news reports on the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear issue showed that about 60 percent of the sources quoted were government officials of the reporters' respective country. Considering that the talks involve six countries, this indicates that the media are very dependent on their own officials' interpretations of the issues. This raises concerns that the media could become vulnerable to manipulation by a government with an agenda.

Gusterson raises valid problems with coverage of North Korea, but I would like to emphasize the real obstacles that journal-

ists face in covering a country to which they have extremely limited access. From my own experience and from my survey of U.S. and South Korean journalists who covered North Korea, I can state confidently that cultivating North Korean contacts is a lot more difficult than Gusterson indicates. Journalists frequently make failed attempts to contact North Korean officials, and even if reached, North Korean officials often refuse to comment or offer comments that are nothing different from what their state-controlled media already said. This is no excuse for biased or inaccurate reporting, but it is important to recognize that lack of access poses a huge obstacle to journalists trying to acquire key information.

So, what can be done to improve coverage of North Korea? As Gusterson points out, reporters should try to include more context and diversify their sources. He argues that opinions from academics are largely ignored in news reports. I think that not only journalists, but also scholars, should try to address this issue. It would be useful for experts to facilitate exchanges by taking the initiative to share their information and opinions with journalists. The "cloud of uncertainty" surrounding intelligence on North Korea is "especially thick," as Gusterson puts it, so coordinated efforts between journalists and experts outside the administration could be vital to providing a clearer picture to the public.

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Hugh Gusterson's article on how the U.S. print media covers North Korea is seriously

flawed. Certainly, the media can always do a better job. Nothing we write is ever perfect, and I welcome and expect thoughtful critiques. But Gusterson's article is not thoughtful and barely qualifies as a legitimate critique. It is a poorly argued and cherry-picked presentation with little understanding of how the media work. In many ways, it is no better than the political commercials that twist or take out of context a vote that a candidate may have once made.

Gusterson makes little distinction between news stories and editorials, when in fact there is a huge difference. Editorial writers can say what they want; you cannot lump them together willy-nilly with news articles. He takes quotes out of context and ignores many articles that dealt with the issues that he says the print media either downplayed or failed to address. A more valid critique would have looked at the totality of the coverage, not snippets that seek to prove a predetermined argument.

Newspaper articles are written under deadline pressure and sometimes have to be cut for space at the last minute. Because of that, not every nuance of this complex issue can be explained exactly the same way every time. And information that is sketchy at first often gets better and more detailed as sources fill in the gaps of knowledge. But Gusterson almost always focuses on the initial stories, not the more complex and detailed narratives that came later.

For instance, he spends several pages claiming that media organizations never gave North Korea's side of the story when the Agreed Framework collapsed. Endnote 22 further states that "on rare occasions where North Korean grievances are alluded to, it is at the end of the article, where few readers venture." Then he gives four examples of such articles—i.e., the twenty-

seventh paragraph of a twenty-nine paragraph *New York Times* story that appeared on December 28, 2002, or an op-ed by Jimmy Carter that appeared on October 11, 2006. He offers no qualification, simply asserting that when North Korea's grievances are mentioned, it is at the end of the article.

However, given his claims of exhaustive research, it is difficult to believe that he missed the fact that on October 21, 2002—five days after news of Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's meeting in Pyongyang emerged—the *Washington Post* ran a 1,200-word article that examined the very issues that Gusterson claims were blithely ignored by the major print media. The headline on the article, by Doug Struck, my colleague at the time in Northeast Asia, was: "For North Korea, U.S. is Violator of Accords."

The article, datelined Seoul, started: "This is the view from the other side: North Korea believes the United States has repeatedly broken agreements, harbors ideas of attacking it and inexplicably refuses to even talk to a government that desperately wants better ties. . . . North Korea has long seen the United States as the chief violator of the pact. The heart of the agreement—from North Korea's perspective—was a promise by the United States to end hostile relations and normalize diplomatic and economic ties. For years, North Korea has complained bitterly that Washington failed to deliver on that promise. The accusation, while self-serving, has some merit, as it conceded even by officials in the international consortium created under the pact."

So much for burying this information in the last paragraph. Gusterson is either deliberately misleading his readers or is a poor researcher.

This is but one example of how the *Washington Post* tried to explain North

Korean thinking to its readers. On February 22, 2005, for instance, I wrote a long article on North Korea's desire to hear Bush utter the words "no hostile intent." The article, "Three Little Words Matter to N. Korea," explained why that diplomatic phrase was so important to Pyongyang and why the Bush administration had avoided saying it. Again, Gusterson takes no notice of this, as it does not appear to fit with the broad brush with which he paints the print media.

Strangely, Gusterson ignores the fine work done on North Korea by the foreign correspondents for the *Post*, *New York Times*, and other news organizations. In my reporting, I generally focused on the policy process in the U.S. government and the diplomatic negotiations, but my colleagues overseas helped complete the picture for our readers. Yet Gusterson, in his footnotes, cites few articles by overseas correspondents for American newspapers.

Gusterson also devotes a lot of space to claiming that the print media only provided one side of the Kelly meeting, not the full picture. Again, this is incorrect. A few weeks after the meeting North Korea issued a statement denying it had admitted to a uranium enrichment program, and I often noted that in my stories, as did other print reporters. Gusterson simply ignores this fact.

As more information leaked out about the fateful meeting, we added to the picture. For instance, on April 20, 2003, I quoted from the North Korean talking points for its meeting with Kelly, which had been obtained by a congressional staff member. The article said that "the North indicated it was prepared to be flexible in four key areas: nuclear inspections, the light-water reactor project required under a 1994 agreement, the future of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula and North Korea's devel-

opment and export of ballistic missiles." The staff member described it as "an invitation to dialogue, and a missed opportunity."

There are many other examples to disprove Gusterson's thesis, but I won't belabor the point. However, I also find disturbing his practice of selectively using quotes.

For instance, he cites one of my articles as an example of opinion-making, giving this quote: "North Korea has a long history of doing things simply . . . to bring the world's attention back to the Stalinist state." Journalists are trained to be wary of ellipsis. Sure enough, Gusterson deleted the words "for the benefit of American satellites." That offending sentence was actually followed by two specific examples of Pyongyang putting on a show for the benefit of satellites—such as laying missiles alongside a parade route, but not in the actual parade itself. But readers would never know that from the way Gusterson rendered the quote.

Finally, Gusterson has the comical view that reporters don't reach out to the North Koreans or that we love to rely on anonymous sources. Nothing could be further from the truth. At the *Post*, we have tried repeatedly to meet and speak with North Korean officials at the United Nations and to obtain visas for travel to North Korea; all have been denied, except for permission to accompany the New York Philharmonic's February 2008 visit to Pyongyang. Reporters detest anonymous sources, and we work hard to not use them. But, particularly on intelligence matters, people who talk on the record get fired or could face criminal prosecution. Unofficial sources, in fact, often help us figure out whether statements made by the president or the secretary of state are false. Many of the important stories of our age—such as

Watergate or the exposure of CIA prisons overseas—would never have been written without the brave assistance of anonymous sources.

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Hugh Gusterson responds

I agree entirely with William Dorman's perceptive letter and appreciate the reaction from Hyunjin Seo. However, I take exception to Glenn Kessler's arguments. In his response to my article on print media coverage of North Korea, Kessler accuses me of cherry-picking data that fit my own preconceptions; of ignoring newspaper articles that question the U.S. government line; of focusing unfairly on early coverage of breaking stories, written under deadline pressure, rather than subsequent articles that got it right; of ignoring the distinction between news stories and editorials; of misconstruing the relationship between reporters and anonymous sources; and, more generally, of having "little understanding of how the media work." (I can dispense with the last point immediately by noting that my mother was a reporter and that I grew up in a home abuzz with her phone conversations with sources and editors.)

Since Kessler, who is a *Washington Post* diplomatic correspondent, wrote some of the stories I critique in my article, I would have been surprised if he had embraced the article's argument. But I am dismayed that this journalist whose work I have on many occasions admired has, committing the very sin he decries, cherry-picked my article, twisting it into straw arguments that are so much easier to tear down than the

ones I actually made. What is at stake here is not only the precise argument I make about the specific details of media coverage of North Korea but, more generally, how pro-government bias—when it exists—works in U.S. newspaper coverage.

Kessler's core argument is that I cherry-pick media coverage of North Korea, ignoring those instances where newspapers do give North Korea's side of the argument. "Information that is sketchy at first often gets better and more detailed as sources fill in the gaps of knowledge. But Gusterson almost always focuses on the initial stories, not the more detailed narratives that came later," he writes. He focuses in particular on press coverage of James Kelly's October 2002 confrontation with the Koreans (saying I claim "that the print media only provided one side of the Kelly meeting, not the full picture"), and on my argument that North Korean grievances against the United States get few column inches. He gives particular prominence to an exceptional *Washington Post* article by Doug Struck on October 21, 2002, that does enumerate North Korea's grievances.

I am mystified that Kessler seems to think that brandishing one or two articles like Struck's somehow discredits my argument. I state clearly that "it would be wrong to suggest that [the North Korean perspective] is completely censored out of American media accounts, but it is so marginalized that it takes special effort—a sort of reading between the lines and against the grain—to develop this point of view, to bring it into focus and nourish it with . . . facts and quotes." In other words, the *Washington Post* is not *Pravda*. North Korea's side of the story is muffled, not censored out.

Let's take the example of U.S. claims that North Korea admitted to illicit uranium

enrichment to explore how this works. Although Kessler says I claim “that the print media only provided one side of the Kelly meeting, not the full picture,” I actually discuss at some length an excellent article by Don Oberdorfer, a former *Washington Post* correspondent with unusually good connections to the North Korean leadership, published in the *Post’s* Outlook section. I quote ten lines from the article, so I hardly gloss it over. The article contradicts the U.S. government’s version of the confrontation, saying that North Korean officials denied having admitted to a uranium enrichment program. According to Kessler’s argument, this new information should have been incorporated into more detailed and nuanced versions of the story in subsequent coverage. Not so. In preparing these comments I reread Kessler’s own coverage of this story between the publication of Oberdorfer’s piece and the end of the year. The six principal articles by Kessler (November 13, 14, 21, 26, December 13 and 31, 2002) simply reiterate as fact that the North Koreans admitted to enriching uranium, making no reference to the questions Oberdorfer raised. As I argue in my article, Oberdorfer’s claims were published in the *Post*, but then it’s as if they disappeared down a memory hole. If one had not happened to read Oberdorfer’s piece, one would have no idea that the Kelly version of events had been questioned. And even for those who had read Oberdorfer’s piece, its effect would be buried beneath repetitious and formulaic statements in subsequent coverage that the North Koreans had confessed to enrichment.

Exactly the same argument applies to Doug Struck’s article retailing North Korea’s grievances against the United States. First of all, the article was buried on page 18, where

many readers would never encounter it (this is, of course, hardly the fault of the reporter). But most important of all, the themes the article explores largely disappear from subsequent coverage. For many readers, what is not repeated is not absorbed.

Kessler also says that “Gusterson has the comical view . . . that we love to rely on anonymous sources.” Love to? Not quite. In my March 12 luncheon debate with Kessler, sponsored by *Nonproliferation Review* (a recording of which is available on the *Review’s* website) I went out of my way to acknowledge the structural pressures that can impel journalists, against their better instincts, to use anonymous sources rather than be beaten to stories by rivals. But surely it is undeniable that the stories that get newspapers into trouble are usually too reliant on anonymous sources: Judith Miller’s reporting on alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the *New York Times’s* coverage of the Wen Ho Lee case, a front page story in the *New York Times* in May 2005 that a Korean nuclear test was imminent, to give a few examples. I know from friends who are journalists that officials’ increasing insistence in recent years on being quoted anonymously worries many of them, but that they are under pressure from editors not to lose the story. This is a problem that will not be fixed by individual reporters or newspapers. But it does need fixing. In my remarks on March 12, I suggested that newspapers adopt a stronger collective code of conduct on this matter.

Kessler defends the use of anonymous sources by saying that “many of the important stories of our age—such as Watergate or the exposure of CIA prisons overseas—would never have been written without the brave assistance of anonymous sources.” Can Kessler really not see the

difference between an official risking his or her career to tell the public about abuses of power at the highest levels of government and undersecretaries of state using the cloak of anonymity to conceal partisan distortions of diplomatic negotiations that they would never make on the record? The latter hardly qualify as whistleblowers.

Finally, Kessler says it is important to distinguish news stories from editorials, where there is more scope for partisan opinion. Although my article mainly analyzes news stories, it does note whenever an editorial is quoted. What I found disturbing when doing the research for the article was the way supposedly factual news stories repeatedly left out important parts of the story (such as U.S. obligations to North Korea under the Agreed Framework), as well as a recurrent smuggling of opinion into news stories. I tried to show how the same themes wash between news and opinions pieces, demonstrating that the distinction between the two genres is, in U.S. newspaper practice, honored as much in the breach as the observance.

In closing, let me take up Hyunjin Seo's point that North Korean sources are hardly easy to access. She is, of course, correct. My point was not that it is easy, but that we should try harder, making more use of underutilized resources such as the KCNA website. There was a time when it was difficult to get Russian or Chinese officials to talk to Western journalists. That is no longer the case. I look forward to the

day when we hear more North Korean voices in our media—or, at the very least, see more often the words, "North Korean officials did not answer calls seeking comment."

I also look forward to the day when our newspapers tell us more often that the U.S. and its allies had an imperfect record in delivering fuel and building light water reactors, as promised under the Agreed Framework, that there are radically different accounts of the vexed October 2002 meeting where the North Koreans supposedly admitted to an illicit uranium enrichment program, that George Bush's 2002 "axis of evil" comments in his State of the Union address were seen as deeply provocative in North Korea, and that at least some factions in North Korea's government seem to have been seeking normalized relations with the United States. Then we will know that journalists are doing what they do at their best (and what Glenn Kessler does at his best): reporting on all sides of the story.

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In his article, "Wake Up, Stop Dreaming: Reassessing Japan's Reprocessing Program" (15.2, March 2008), Masafumi Takubo stated on p. 71 that Japan had accumulated "nearly 45 MT of unseparated plutonium." This figure actually refers to separated plutonium and was correctly stated throughout the rest of the article.

The *Nonproliferation Review* welcomes input from its readers and encourages a dialogue on the topics covered and articles published in the journal. Please send all letters to Editor Stephen Schwartz, stephen.schwartz@miis.edu. Be sure to include your contact information, including mailing address. Letters may be edited for length, clarity, and style. The authors of the correspondence published in this section maintain copyright © to their letters.