

## Reporting on the impossible: The use of defectors in covering North Korea

*There are few countries that command more attention in international news than North Korea. The irony is North Korea is also very difficult to cover because so little information is allowed in and out of the country. This leads journalists writing on North Korea to rely on indirect sources, most commonly pundits and defectors. This paper looks at the use of defectors in covering North Korea from the perspective of journalists based in Seoul and Tokyo reporting for the international news media. Issues of defector reliability and verifiability are explored as well as the political and ideological dimension of defector testimony. This paper argues more care should be taken in using defectors and their testimony in reporting North Korea. The uncritical use of defectors as sources not only skews audience understanding of North Korea and its people but also silences the defector community's voices and takes away the opportunity for defectors to share accurate and truthful accounts of their experiences.*

**Keywords:** community, defectors, journalism, journalists, North Korea, testimony

### Introduction

In the digitally disrupted era popular news on North Korea is a growth industry. Of course, the irony is North Korea is almost impossible to report on. Getting information in and the out of the country is notoriously difficult leaving few avenues for reliable news and information. This has curbed neither the appetite for news on North Korea nor a desire to fuel this insatiable appetite on the part of the world's news media organisations. Indeed, North Korea's isolation has resulted in an 'anything goes' approach to reporting the nation that would not be acceptable in covering any other country. As a result, two types of news appear on North Korea. The first are based on actual events. Most recently these stories tend to cover test missile launches into the Sea of Japan (East Sea) and the detonation of nuclear devices in the north of the country. Occasionally, journalists are al-

lowed into the country to an event, as was the case during the 75th anniversary of the founding of the country in 2016, but even in these instances there is no freedom of movement for the invited journalists. James Pearson (2016), a Reuter's North Korean specialist based in Seoul, South Korea, said these types of trips into North Korea were often of little value while the restrictions imposed on the foreign press corps resulted in journalists reporting on what other journalists were doing or, even worse, journalists reporting on themselves.

The second type of story to emerge on the country in the Western press can be defined as highly speculative or loosely fictional. This category is wide and includes the more ridiculous and salacious stories that so often form the backbone of the news coverage of North Korea. These often feature Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and his love of cheese, unusual hairstyles and his cruelty and violence to his own family. Sometimes there are sourceless stories commenting on the nature of North Korean society and sometimes the stories resemble little more the tourist snaps from a trip to Pyongyang that are repackaged and shared across news websites as 'forbidden pictures' from the world's most repressive regime. This gives an air of danger and excitement that otherwise is absent. These types of stories can come as a reaction to a real event or take the form of an analytical piece that seeks to shed light on 'tensions' on the peninsula. There is a specific anatomy to this kind of story in that they tend to feature a familiar cast of experts and pundits whose speculation is reported as the final word on the subject. It is common for these stories to also include defector testimony – insights and information from those who have left North Korea and most commonly settled in South Korea. This paper looks at the role defectors play in the coverage of North Korea from the point of view of journalists covering the country for Western news organisations.

### Defectors in the news

Defectors living in South Korea are a microcosm of the diversity of life in North Korea. Some were high-ranking army generals, others were agricultural labourers, others were public servants. However, too often this level of difference is represented in stereotypical and homogenous terms. It also does little to show their difficult transition to life outside of North Korea. For most North Korean defectors who settle in South Korea life is not always easy. According to the South Korean Ministry for Unification (Couch 2017), more than 70 per cent of defectors residing in South Korea are female and have a suicide rate three times higher than that of mainstream South Korean society. Defectors are more prone to mental illness than South Koreans and less likely to seek help. From time to time, stories emerge of defectors who want to repatriate to the north (Williamson 2014) highlighting the less than ideal standard of living for some defectors in the south. A recent study sponsored by the South Korean government's National Human Rights Commission of Korea's (NHRCK) and led by Inha University (Ahn 2017) looking at the plight of North Koreans living in the south found many of those

surveyed suffered significant hardship in their adopted home.

Almost 500 people were surveyed and the study found '45.4 per cent of defector respondents said they were discriminated against for their North Korean background' (Ahn 2017). The most common forms of discrimination included prejudice in finding employment, access to education and access to medical care. The NHRCK estimated the defector population living in South Korea was approximately 30,000, more than triple the 2006 population of 9000. The study also examined the biggest violators of defector rights in South Korea and found journalists to be the worst. At issue here, was a tendency on the part of journalists operating in South Korea failing to protect the anonymity of defectors and distorting defector accounts of life and escape from North Korea.

The use of defectors as sources for news on North Korea is a recent phenomenon. In referring to academic scholarship, Green (2017) argues the use of defectors as sources of information on North Korea gathered pace during the mid-2000s. He divides defectors into six distinct groups based on when they left North Korea:

- 'system selective migrants' of the period 1945-50;
- refugees of the Korean War from 1950 to 53;
- Cold War 'heroes who returned to the state' between 1962 and 1993;
- post-Cold War 'returning brethren' of 1993-97;
- the 'escaping residents' of 1997 to 2004; and
- 'new settlers' of the mid-2000s to the present day (Green 2017).

According to Green, it is the last group that supplies the current market for defector testimony. He goes on to argue the reasons for the last group making their way to South Korea are as varied as the defectors themselves, and the tendency by foreign media and scholars to categorise the reason for defectors leaving the DPRK based solely on hardship and deprivation within the country is dishonest and egregious (Green 2017b). Green argues the most recent group of defectors, the post-famine 'group six', defect for a myriad of reasons that often have little to do with hardship or deprivation in North Korea. Sometimes, it is as simple as wanting to be with loved ones in the south or wanting a better education for their children. This view was reinforced by the journalists interviewed as part of this study. Green also takes aim at the title 'defector' in labelling those who have made the move south, preferring to use 'escapees'. Green is not the first to make this observation with Min (2016) noting the translation from the Korean is 'escapee' or 'new settler/resettler' than defector. The term defector throws up interesting questions around the popular representation of North Korea and North Koreans.

'Defector' is a Cold War term and, as Cumings (2004) argues, the way North Korea is constructed and represented in broader Western media

is binary and conforms to crude Cold War narratives. Cumings further argues this binary is imbued with Said's (1978) Orientalism creating a vision of the Asian despot that is at the same time terrifying and ridiculous:

'Cunning' and 'shrewd' are standard adjectives in stereotypes of Asians; 'brutal' is another, at least since Genghis Khan, with Pol Pot and Mao reinforcing the image in our time. The broad distinction between the static or indolent East and the dynamic, progressive West goes all the way back to Herodotus and Aristotle. ... A brutal satrap presided over a semi-arid environment, running armies of bureaucrats and soldiers, regulating the paths of great rivers, and employing vast amounts of slave labour in gigantic public works projects (the Great Wall). The despot above and the cringing mass below prevented the emergence of anything resembling a modern middle class... (Cumings 2005).

Under these conditions, is it any wonder why a person would choose to 'defect' from such a society? Certainly, the instinct to flee such conditions would be strong. However, Cumings is not the only scholar to ask fundamental questions on the representation of North Korea. For others, misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the nature of North Korea as a political, social and commercial entity goes to the very heart of issues in not only the press and foreign policy coverage of the country, but also how North Korea is approached and appraised by the outside world. In writing on the issues faced by Washington policy-makers in formulating effective policy on North Korea, Pinkston and Saunders (2003) argue that sometimes difficulties in understanding North Korea stem from linguistic and cultural differences between the two nations. Most lasting, they argue, are deeply ingrained misunderstandings and misinterpretations on the part of US policy-makers based on incomplete information and ambiguous circumstances. These misunderstandings result in 'cognitive simplifications' (ibid: 94). The two go on to caution:

Policymakers need to be aware of these barriers and be open to alternative interpretations of North Korean behaviour. In policy terms, this suggests the importance of testing North Korea intentions through dialogue rather than making assumptions based on ideology or abstract models (ibid).

Lankov (2013) argues this is not new with Western policy-makers and news media having built a reputation for misinterpreting North Korea. Far from being barbarians irrationally looking to destroy the world with whatever means at their disposal, Lankov (2013: xiii) argues there is a clear logic to North Korean interactions with the rest of the world. Lankov argues popular representations that paint North Korea as a 'mad country', 'the world's last Stalinist regime', 'a nation of nuclear blackmailers' and other clichés, are lazy and deny the complexities of modern North Korea. Lankov says the very survival of North Korea is testament to their capacity to strategise and to maximise their position and opportunity within the international community. For Lankov, there is little or no ideolog-

ical component to how North Korea operates and sees itself, beyond what is needed to maintain the status quo within the country. Habib (2011: 60) agrees, saying the regime is geared for survival at all costs. This renders the Cold War binary narrative that characterises much of the news media coverage of North Korea an anachronism at best. Lankov says:

In spite of all this, however, it has managed to survive and exploit divisions between the world's major powers to maximum effect. You simply cannot achieve this by being irrational. The North Korean leaders know perfectly well what they are doing. They are neither lunatics nor ideological zealots; rather, they have shown themselves to be remarkably efficient and cold-minded calculators, perhaps the most ruthless and Machiavellian leaders in the world today (2013: xiii-xiv).

Myers (2015) goes further and argues the representations and understanding of North Korea as a political entity are so flawed, the exact ideological nature of the state has never been understood. Instead, he argues, any chance in the mainstream of an accurate reckoning of the country is lost to the familiar Cold War binary of good and evil. Myers argues this is best seen in how the North Korean theory *Juche* is viewed and understood by the Western literati. *Juche* best translates to 'self-reliance' and has long been touted by North Korea watchers as the North Korean extension of Marxist-Leninism, Stalinism and Maoism. Myers argues this is nonsense and says *Juche* exists in part 'as a decoy to draw the world's attention away from the *de facto* ideology of radical race-nationalism' (2015: 2). Myers goes on to say *Juche* has become a convenient tool of academic group-think on explaining North Korean ideology within a Cold War framework and as such the concept itself is seldom subject to critical examination. Indeed, when it does come under scrutiny, it is opaque to the point it does not stand the rigours of thorough investigation. Regarding *Juche*, Cummings asserts, 'the closer one gets to *Juche's* meaning, the more it slips away' (2005: 159). Myers argues in emphasising *Juche's* self-reliance as the guiding ideology and as an extension of Marxist/Leninism, they ignore the emphasis the regime in Pyongyang puts on race and ethnicity despite 'its explicit racial theorizing, its strident acclamation of Koreans as the world's "cleanest" or "purist" race' (2010: 14). For Myers, North Korea is a fascist state that shares more with its former colonial masters, Imperial Japan, than it does with China, the Soviet Union, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao or even Hegel. The continued conflation of North Korea and communism leads to flaws in the way the country is understood and gross inaccuracies in reading what is taking place in the country. Myers (2017) argues:

This results in part from the failed-communist model of the country which (itself a failure) has done much to divert the world's attention to inessentials. If you think the regime's ostensible ideology is a self-reliant form of Confucian Marxism-Leninism, you will naturally search in vain for signs of it in North Korean life. You will then zoom in

on reflections of that presumed ideology's impotence: the black markets, the thriving trade in luxury goods. If you thought New Zealand was a Shia theocracy, you would regard the opening of every new bar in Auckland as a newsworthy Sign of Change.

If the very basis of how we understand North Korea is flawed, what is feeding that narrative? The real problem in reporting and studying North Korea stems from an inability to meaningfully engage with the country and its people. This leads to the inaccuracies and wild speculation outlined above. If, as it is argued here, it is impossible to report on the country with any certainty, where are journalists going to source stories? Within the findings that came from the 20 interviews in this study, sources used in reporting North Korea included academics, other journalists, South Korea news stories, North Korean state media (most notably the KCNA and *Rodong Shimun*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea) and defectors, more often than not living in South Korea. The findings also demonstrated there were issues in the reliability of all these sources with defectors and their testimony being particularly problematic. Issues in which defectors and how defector testimony was used reigned supreme. Defector testimony was used to support an isolationist premised narrative on North Korea under the guise of human rights. Defector testimony on human rights within North Korea lent a human voice that would otherwise be absent. Smith (2014) says:

The lack of transparency of the North Korean government is the main and causative reason behind worst-case suspicions about human rights abuses. ... It is ethically correct to raise concerns about a lack of transparency and to pursue vigorously the efforts by international campaigners to allow independent access to penal facilities. It is not ethically correct to fill the information vacuum with stereotypes, caricature, and lazy analysis (ibid: 142).

Sadly, as this study will demonstrate, stereotyping, caricature and lazy analysis are all hallmarks of the use and treatment of North Korean refugees and their community as a whole in reporting North Korea from South Korea.

Twenty journalists feeding the English language news media were interviewed as part of this study to gauge their attitudes to the use of defectors in reporting on North Korea. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and took place between September and December 2016. At the time of the interviews all of the interviewees were working for news organisations including the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Korea Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *BBC*, *Al Jazeera*, the *Guardian*, *Forbes* and *NKNews.org*. All of the interviewees live in South Korea or spend extended periods of time there as part of their role reporting on North Korea.

#### **The rise of the celebrity defector and the case of Park Yeon-mi**

Shin Dong-hyuk was the first defector to have his testimony on human rights in North Korea heard by the United Nations and his story of

hardship and suffering would go on to form the backbone of Justice Michael Kirby's Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 2014. In 2012, a book on Shin by former *Washington Post* correspondent Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One man's remarkable odyssey from North Korea*, was published, joining a growing number of publications on life in North Korea. Shin's tale of escape from a North Korean political prison across the Tumen River into China and on to freedom in South Korea became an international bestseller and Shin and his story were harnessed by human rights groups unsympathetic to the regime in Pyongyang to highlight human rights abuses in North Korea. As Shin's profile increased, so did questions around the accuracy of this account of not only his life in North Korea but also his escape. Notably, voices in South Korea's North Korean defector community were most vocal about inconsistencies in Shin's account. In 2015, Shin retracted large parts of his story (Fifield 2015) admitting parts of what he had told Harden in writing the account of his life were hyperbolic or fabricated.

In the interviews that drive this study, Shin was a topic of hot conversation. Andrei Lankov (2016), a professor of North Korean Studies, pundit and journalist, said while Shin's case was sad, it was endemic of the issues involved in using the defector community in reporting North Korea. Lankov was unambiguous in his condemnation of Shin, saying he was driven by money and pressure from human rights organisations to tell his story the way he did. Lankov also said he did not believe in human rights and as such was able to stay detached from the hype surrounding Shin and identify him as a 'fake' long before he was exposed. Choe Sung-hun (2016), *The New York Times* correspondent in Seoul, said that, although he was not completely dismissive of Shin early on, as the hype around the defector grew, so did suspicions around Shin's testimony. 'Shin lied to me and so many others.' he said. Choe and Lankov argued the Shin saga had cast a shadow over the validity and use of defector testimony in reporting North Korea.

Fifield (2016b) says she thought Shin's situation was complex and there was probably trauma that affected his testimony. Fifield argues Shin's story escalated because his biographer had relied on only a single source – Shin. She says this was the undoing of Shin Dong-hyuk and the 'ghost' writer of his memoir Blaine Harden:

The big lesson I learned for the Shin Dong-hyuk controversy was the importance of having a number of sources and not resting your entire story on one person. When you looked at Barbara Demick's book, *Nothing to Envy*, she had six characters and she could cross-check facts with each of them. If one fell over, you still had a story. That's diversifying the risk. In Blane's case, there was no one else who had come out of Camp 14. He couldn't cross check. That is something that became an issue for me. I need to be very careful (2016b).

For some of those interviewed, the Shin saga had reinforced the necessity of employing the basics of good journalism. Journalists Pear-

son (2016), Gale (2016), O'Carroll (2016), Choe (2016), Choi (2016), Kirk (2016) and Lee (2016) all made the same point – relying on a solitary source whose testimony is difficult to verify, prove or disprove, is very dangerous.

The discrediting of Shin did little to dampen the enthusiasm for celebrity defectors and their stories. Park Yeon-mi emerged as a 'celebrity defector' in the wake of Shin. Like Lee Hyeonseo, another of the second wave of celebrity defectors, Park Yeon-mi was young, attractive and female. For journalists wanting insights on North Korea she was a boon. Another bonus was the fact that Park spoke English and 2015 was a breakout year for her and her story. Her book, *In order to live: A North Korea girl's journey to freedom* (2016) was published and Park and her management embarked upon an international promotional tour that included radio and television appearances around the world. At about the same time, a second defector, Lee Hyeonseo, was touring and promoting her book, *The girl with seven names: A North Korean defector's story* (2016). Lee was a more seasoned celebrity than Park featuring as a TED presenter (2013).

As early as 2014, foreign journalists based in Seoul were questioning the truthfulness of Park's story with Seoul-based freelance journalist John Power penning pieces on the topic for *thediplomat.com* (2014) and the *Christian Science Monitor* (2015). In the articles, Power questioned inconsistencies in Park's defection story. Power (2016) says that, after the stories went to publication, he and his employers received heavy criticism online and offline. Power says:

I got a lot of grief for the story I wrote about Yeon-mi Park. I pissed off every right-winger. The KCNA even quoted that article saying: 'Even an Irish journalist knows that Yeon-mi Park is lying.' When I wrote that story I was aware a lot of left-wingers were anti her. Anyway, I wrote the story raising the questions people had about her and it got me in a load of shit (2016).

Power's insights reveal a political dimension in the use of defectors as sources for news and stories on North Korea. Those from the right support an isolationist approach to dealing with North Korea and are more inclined to use defectors in their journalism. The opposite was true for those on the left, who favour broader engagement with North Korea. This was a point raised in interviews with Pearson (2016), Fifield (2016), Choi (2016), Choe (2016) and Lankov (2016). Lankov, in making reference to the political nature of the use of defectors in journalism, says there were 'bigger forces of manipulation at play' with the Park story, and despite a greater acceptance within the journalist and academic community of the hyperbolic nature of some defector stories and testimony, there was a reluctance to change.

Australian Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) journalist Mary Ann Jolly (2014) went further than Power in her investigation of Park. Jolly revealed links between the US libertarian non-profit organisation, Atlas Foundation, and Park. Jolly systematically debunked Park's story with

the help of anonymous defectors, academics (including Lankov) and Park's own words. Park had become a celebrity in South Korea starring in a reality television programme featuring other young female defectors where she had distinguished herself as being from a well-to-do family that had been largely insulated from the slings and arrows of day-to-day life in North Korea. Later, Jolly argues, the story changed to one that put Park and her family at the centre of suffering. Power says the main problem in verifying defector accounts like Park's is they are almost impossible to verify and there is neither the time nor the money to do so.

What emerges again is a willingness on the part of those reporting about North Korea to over-emphasise aspects of their narratives, but according to Lankov (2016), fabricating parts of the typical defector story is necessary if the story is going to sell. Lankov says although Park's story was not as fabricated as Shin's, Park was driven by the media to make up her story and she has been paid handsomely for doing so.

Lankov said while the North Korea defector story was sad, the world was full of sad tales of the plights and journeys of refugees from North Korea and elsewhere. Lankov characterised the typical defector experience as follows:

The real story of the refugee does not sell. It's easier to create some fake stories about obligatory torture in the camps every second Saturday then to tell the real story which is boring. Something like: 'I was starving. My sister starved to death. My brother tried to run away and was shot by border guards. I had nothing to eat. I went to China. In China I worked on a farm. I was raped by the owner. I was then intercepted by the police. They sent me back to North Korea where I spent a few months in prison. I was beaten occasionally and released. I then went back to China because I had nothing to do. There, brokers sold me into a brothel, but I escaped, and some kindly Chinese peasant took me as his wife. He was 20 years older than me but unless he was drunk he never beat me. We had two children. Someone then told me if a move to South Korea I can make some money, live much better and get an education for my children, so I decided to move' (Lankov 2016).

This is how Lankov defines a typical defector experience. As horrific as this experience is, there is a tendency on the part of defectors, the people who manage defectors and journalists to take these stories and accentuate the deprived and distressing parts of these accounts. For Lankov, the main reason for the distortion of these stories is commercial. Lankov asserts the defector community in Seoul is disadvantaged and the opportunity to make easy money telling their stories is difficult to pass up. The problem is with so many people sharing experiences like the one above, the marketplace for defector stories is crowded and that has led to defectors outdoing each other to sell their stories. It is worth noting all of the journalists interviewed said the 'cash for comment' approach to defectors and their testimony is endemic, but none of those interviewed said they engaged in the practice. Choe argues:

Some of them have a habit when they meet a reporter, they begin imagining: 'What kind of answer is he looking for?' They will provide the answer they think you want. I think the best way to deal with defectors is this, we really have to know the defectors and let the defectors know you – that can be hard when you are writing stories on the run. You should trust each other and let the defector know you are only expecting them to tell the truth. We need to let them know we are not looking for fancy quotes or horrible made up stories about NK. We are not expecting them to dramatise their experiences. We need to build a report or a relationship. Defectors in a capitalist world quickly learn reporters in a capitalist world are looking for sensational stories and they think they are expected to present a very dramatic version of their experiences – even exaggerating them if necessary (2016).

Choe's appraisal of the engagement between journalists and defectors was supported by Jolly in her investigation into Park Yeon-mi. Jolly wrote in 2014, regarding the perceived consistencies and fabrications in Park's story:

My concern is, if someone with a high profile twists their story to fit the narrative we have come to expect for North Korean defectors, our perspective of the country could become dangerously skewed. We need to have a full and truthful picture of life in North Korea if we are to help those living under its abysmally cruel regime and those who try to flee (Jolly 2014).

The same goes for North Korean defectors living abroad. Distorting their experiences in and leaving North Korea does nothing to improve their situation in their adopted countries. Again, as Jolly makes clear, hyperbolic accounts of life and escape from North Korea do very little to enable people on the outside to come any closer to having an accurate view or understanding of the country, its people and its relationship with the rest of the world.

#### Journalists and defectors

In the wake of the Shin Dong-hyuk affair and the rising doubts surrounding other celebrity defectors, the interviews with journalists covering North Korea revealed concerns with the overall treatment of defectors and their testimony in the international news media.

For Jean Lee (2016), the former head of Associated Press in Seoul from 2008-2011 and then the founding Associated Press Bureau Chief in Pyongyang 2012-2013, the rise of the North Korean defector as sources for stories did not really take off until 2012. Lee says the rise of the defectors as key sources in telling stories on the north has happened with the decline of the fortunes of the foreign correspondent. Moreover, there was a correlation between an increasing casualisation of the workforce covering North Korea and falling standards of journalism. As result, many of those who remained covering the Koreas were lacking the language skills and a knowledge of the history and culture it takes to cover North Korea effectively. Lee says:

There are very few journalists of our generation who speak Korean. There was a time

when Associated Press provided language training. There is no budget for that anymore (2016).

Across the course of the interviews there was a clear divide between those who can speak Korean and those who cannot. With those who can speak Korean, like Choe, Lankov, Power, Choi, Lee and York, there was a clearer sense that defectors were not always reliable. The lack of language skills then drives non-Korean journalists covering North Korea to rely on others to put them in touch with defectors through interpreters or defectors who can speak English. Power says because of this there is not only a lack of diversity in defectors being used as sources in reporting North Korea, the opportunity to question testimony or verify within the defector community is diminished. The interviews with journalists who could speak Korean revealed a greater sense of scepticism about defectors. Those who could not speak Korean were less concerned about the reliability of defectors owing to the time and resources it takes to prove or disprove defector testimony. This did not stop them from using defectors in their journalism. Pearson (2016) says all sources need to be treated on their merits, and defectors were no different. Pearson asserts there is a tendency for many of those reporting on North Korea to treat what defectors say as gospel, and he says he finds it hard to understand why defectors are so poorly deployed as sources for stories on North Korea. He says like any source, defectors need to be used on a case-by-case basis with the best source fitting the story.

The failings of journalists and journalism is not only relevant to those covering North Korea. According to Nicols (2017), the 'death of expertise' in journalism due to shrinking budgets has resulted in a decline of not only the amount journalists are paid but also to the quality of their work. What results is a downward spiral that has resulted in falling trust in the news media. At the same time, the internet has seen the consumption of news as a media product increase. Keeping up with the demand to 'feed the beast', as several interviewees termed the nature of contemporary journalism, leads to defectors becoming attractive sources for news, stories and comment on North Korea.

Fifield (2016b) says one of things that annoys her the most was the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to using defectors. She says she sees far too many instances of voices that do not fit the story at hand. She says:

You see it all the time. Journalists and activists who find some farmer from North Hamkung Province to comment on the nuclear crisis and the nuclear weapons programme. No wonder people make stuff up – of course he is going to feel compelled to answer and just start making stuff up (2016b).

While Fifield, Pearson and others placed the blame with problems in defectors and defector testimony on journalist's lack of skill and awareness in using defectors as sources, Choe (2016) said there were bigger focuses at play. Like Lankov (2016), Choe (2016) says the manipulation of Western journalists on the part of anti-North Korea and human rights organisa-

tions through the use and deployment of defectors was rife. He says it feeds the isolationist agenda and does nothing to further the cause of defectors and people in North Korea. Rather, Choe argues, defectors and their testimony are vital in attracting funding, particularly from the United States, for the organisations they serve. Choe says non-Korean speaking and 'parachute journalists' (Hilaire 2004) desperate for stories on North Korea are easy prey for human rights organisations. He adds these organisations share and coach a small number of defectors leading to decreased diversity in defector voices being heard and a tendency toward hyperbole. Choe says:

I see human rights activists doing this all the time. I have a serious problem with that. The human rights problem in the North Korea is serious one but that doesn't mean we have to exaggerate and make up stories to bring attention to the problem. This is why I am sceptical about talking to defectors. The story behind the story here is how journalists are led by human rights organisations (2016).

Choe says under these circumstances defectors feeding the Western media lies and falsehoods is a matter of course. Pearson (2016) countered saying there was an ideological component in what Choe argued, and journalists needed to be aware of how their politics influenced how they reported North Korea. This included how journalists did and did not make use of defectors in their work. Pearson highlighted Choe as a journalist who sits on the left of South Korean politics and is ideologically driven and as such is inherently distrustful of defectors.

For Pearson (2016), Fifield (2016b), Power (2016) and Gale (2016), a key issue in the relationship between defectors and journalists was the fact defectors living in South Korea had scant knowledge about what was going on in North Korea. Indeed, due to the restrictions on the flow of information in and out of North Korea, a defector's information hardly constituted news. Also, the longer a defector resided in the south the more savvy they became in their interactions with journalists and the more likely they were to alter their story to fit the demands of a ravenous news industry. For Pearson and others, defectors were a vital source of stories and information as long as the defectors had not been corrupted.

Fifield (2016b) says she used trips to the Chinese side of the North Korean border to meet and interview recent defectors. She argues this was far more effective in uncovering what was going on in North Korea than trips to Pyongyang or talking to defectors in Seoul:

The defectors I meet in northern China are more likely to be in touch with people in North Korea and are more likely to be recent escapees. The information is up to date and they haven't been sucked into the defector testimony machine and realised this can be a moneymaking enterprise for them. They are much less likely to exaggerate (2016b).

Fifield says some of her best work on North Korea has come from trips to China and then

following the defector routes south through Laos and Thailand to the South Korean embassy in Bangkok (2016a). Pearson and Power made similar observations. For Pearson and Fifield, these kinds of trips are made possible by the resources of Reuters and the *Washington Post*. For Power, a freelance journalist, doing this kind of rigorous, considered and informed journalism was so expensive it put it out of his reach on all but one occasion. What became clear across the interviews was a paradox. With the broader contraction in journalism as an industry in the wake of digital disruption, there was less money allocated to news on both North Korea and South Korea. However, during the same period there had been an escalation in interest on North Korea. This had led to a demand for more news and stories on North Korea. Defector stories and defector testimony help meet that demand. Despite the impressive resources at her disposal, Fifield laments having to 'feed the beast' for content on North Korea as even *Washington Post* reporters live and die on the popularity of their stories. Fifield says metrics matter and all too often it is the salacious, formulaic and predictable stories that rate over the serious and considered.

### Conclusion

There are clear issues in the use and promotion of North Korean defectors by journalists reporting for a non-Korean audience. This not only skews the coverage of North Korea to set an agenda (MacCombs 2004) favouring an isolationist ideology in dealing with the country, it also fails the community it draws from. In failing to tell accurate and real stories of the defector experience, journalists covering North Korea are misrepresenting an entire community and the experiences that define that community. The uncritical acceptance of defector stories that are all too often revealed to be inaccurate or false leaves other stories of immense suffering by North Koreans at the hands of North Korean authorities unsaid.

An inability to gauge the candour of defectors because of language difficulties and issues around paying for comment on the part of journalists were shown as key reasons to be sceptical of defectors. Associated issues in not recognising the mercurial nature of some defector accounts also takes a toll on the validity of such stories. Despite failings in the use and promotion of defectors and their testimony, defectors have a place in the lexicon of doing journalism on North Korea. Gale says:

Defectors are important. When we are laughing at stories about Kim Jong-un's cheese habit, we need to remember what he and his regime do to the people of that country. Whether the defector arrived in the south in 1995 or yesterday doesn't matter. They are important in reminding us when we write about North Korea we are writing about people. We as journalists should not forget that (2016).

The onus needs to fall on the journalist and the organisation they represent to get it right. In a climate of shrinking newsroom budgets, hyperbolic fake news and click bait, taking the time to get it right could very well be fanciful. Even

so, the cost of the uncritical use of defectors in reporting North Korea goes deeper than simple story-telling. It impacts the way the rest of the world views and understands North Korean communities at home and abroad.

### References

- Ahn, J. (2017) Almost half of defectors experience discrimination in the South: Major survey, *nknews.org*, 15 March. Available online at <https://www.nknews.org/2017/03/close-to-half-of-defectors-face-discrimination-in-the-south-says-govt-survey/>, accessed on 27 August 2017
- Choe, S. (2016) Personal communication, 30 November
- Choi, H. (2016) Personal communication, 4 December
- Couch, C. (2017) The psychological trauma of defecting from North Korea, *pbs.org*, 16 February. Available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/body/north-korea-mental-health/>, accessed on 4 September 2017
- Cummings, B. (2004) *North Korea another country*, New York, New Press
- Cummings, B. (2005) We look at it and see ourselves: Fantasies of Korea, *London Review of Books*, 15 December. Available online at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n24/bruce-cummings/we-look-at-it-and-see-ourselves>, accessed on 21 August 2017
- Fifield, A. (2015) Prominent North Korean defector Shin Dong-hyuk admits parts of his story are inaccurate, *washingtonpost.com*, 17 January. Available online at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/prominent-n-korean-defector-shin-dong-hyuk-admits-parts-of-story-are-inaccurate/2015/01/17/fc69278c-9dd5-11e4-bcfb-059ec7a93ddc\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3c5d4e1f6e74](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/prominent-n-korean-defector-shin-dong-hyuk-admits-parts-of-story-are-inaccurate/2015/01/17/fc69278c-9dd5-11e4-bcfb-059ec7a93ddc_story.html?utm_term=.3c5d4e1f6e74), accessed on 21 August 2017
- Fifield, A. (2016a) She fled North Korea and turned to online sex work. Then she escaped again, *washingtonpost.com*, 18 October. Available online at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korean-women-who-escape-find-they-have-little-to-sell-except-themselves/2016/10/17/851f650d-4124-4624-a01b-30a1b82b13ab\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korean-women-who-escape-find-they-have-little-to-sell-except-themselves/2016/10/17/851f650d-4124-4624-a01b-30a1b82b13ab_story.html), accessed on 5 September 2017
- Fifield, A. (2016b) Personal communication, 17 November
- Gale, A. (2016) Personal communication, 1 November
- Green, C. (2017) Publishing trends in North Korea research, *nknews.org*, 12 April. Available online at <https://www.nknews.org/pro/publishing-trends-in-north-korea-research/>, accessed on 5 September 2017
- Green, C. (2017) Why North Korean defectors choose to leave, *nknews.org*, 27 April. Available online at <https://www.nknews.org/pro/why-do-north-korean-defectors-choose-to-leave/>, accessed on 5 September 2017
- Habib, B. (2011) North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and the maintenance of the Songun system, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 pp 43-64
- Harden, B. (2016) *Escape from Camp 14*, New York, Penguin
- Hilaire, Avril (2004) Journalists and humanitarian NGOs, *Nieman Reports*, Vol. 58, No. 3 pp 24-25
- Jolly, M. (2014) The Strange Tale of Yeonmi Park, *thediplomat.com*, 16 December. Available online at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/the-strange-tale-of-yeonmi-park>, accessed on 1 September 2017
- Kirk, D. (2016) Personal communication, 11 December
- Lankov, A. (2013) *The real North Korea life and politics in the failed Stalinist utopia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Lankov, A. (2016) Personal communication, 30 October
- Lee, H. (2013) My escape from North Korea, *ted.com*. Available online at [https://www.ted.com/talks/hyeonseo\\_lee\\_my\\_escape\\_from\\_north\\_korea](https://www.ted.com/talks/hyeonseo_lee_my_escape_from_north_korea), accessed on 21 August 2017
- Lee, H. and John, D. (2016) *The girl with seven names: Escape from North Korea*, London, William Collins
- Lee, J. (2016) Personal communication, 1 October
- MacCombs, M. (2004) *Setting the agenda the mass media and public opinion*, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, Polity, Blackwell
- Min, L. (2016) *Marching through suffering: Loss and survival in North Korea* by Sandra Fahy (review) *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No. 3 pp 987-992
- Park, Y. and Vollers, M. (2016) *In order to live: a North Korean girl's journey to freedom*, London, Penguin Books
- Myers, B. (2010) *The cleanest race: How North Koreans see themselves – and why it matters*, New York, Melville House
- Myers, B. (2015) *North Korea's Juche myth*, Busan, Sthele Press
- Myers, B. (2017) On media coverage of North Korea (again), *sthelepress.com*, 28 July. Available online at <http://sthelepress.com/index.php/2017/07/19/on-media-coverage-of-north-korea-again/>, accessed on 23 August 2017
- Nichols, T. M. (2017) *The death of expertise: The campaign against established knowledge and why it matters*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press
- O'Carroll, C. (2016) Personal communication, 9 November
- Pinkston, D. and Saunders, P. (2003) Seeing North Korea clearly, *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 3 pp 79-102

---

## Richard Murray

- Pearson, J. (2016) Personal communication, 22 November
- Power, J. (2014) North Korea: Defectors and their skeptics, *thediplomat.com*, 16 November. Available online at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/north-korea-defectors-and-their-skeptics/> accessed on 29 August 2017
- Power, J. (2015) Celebrated Korean gulag defector changes story. Does that change the truth?, *csmonitor.com*, 21 January. Available online at <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2015/0121/Celebrated-Korean-gulag-defector-changes-story.-Does-that-change-the-truth>, accessed on 4 September 2017
- Power, J. (2016) Personal communication, 28 September
- Smith, H. (2014) Crimes against humanity, *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1 pp 127-143
- Williamson, L. (2014) The North Korean defectors who want to return home, *bbc.com*, 5 March. Available online from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-26340583>, accessed on 3 September 2017

## Note on the contributor

Richard Murray is a PhD student in the School of Communication and Arts at the University of Queensland. Before arriving in Queensland, he worked as a journalist across Asia and Oceania and as a journalism educator in South Korea.