Narrating North Korea: The Embedded Logics in Anglophone Journalism

By

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Dedication

For my mother

and my late maternal grandmother

in honor of all the strong women who thrive in the face of adversity.

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Introduction

In late April 2020, news reports around the world began to question whether North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-Un, was gravely ill or even dead. On CNN, Chief National Security Correspondent Jim Scuitto cited a "US official with direct knowledge" that said the US was "monitoring intelligence that North Korea's leader … is in grave danger after a surgery" (Scuitto et al., 2020). Speculation built in the subsequent two weeks about the truth regarding Kim Jong-Un's health, as news outlets cited South Korean government officials downplaying the idea that the North Korean leader was dead (e.g., Kim, 2020; Choe, 2020a). Even TMZ, a website dedicated to celebrity and entertainment news, reported on Kim Jong-Un's health with headlines such as "N. KOREA DICTATOR KIM JONG-UN REPORTEDLY DEAD… After Botched Heart Surgery" and "KIM JONG-UN 'ALIVE AND WELL' … OR DEAD???" ("Kim Jong-Un 'alive and well'," 2020; "N. Korea dictator," 2020). By the beginning of May, pictures and video emerged of Kim Jong-Un visiting a fertilizer plant, providing confirmation he was still alive.

Far from being an isolated incident, rumors are a common, cyclical occurrence in news reporting on North Korea. Even as journalists remain skeptical of the veracity of information circulating among those who watch North Korea closely, these rumors often become news stories. The argument that journalists suffer from a glut of information that makes it hard for them to determine what is significant and relevant to their audiences (Fulton, 1996) rings true on some level in reporting on North Korea, as journalists are tasked with sorting through all of the rumors and chatter to determine which sources are credible and what "information" warrants reporting. However, the information environment in relation to North Korea is often referred to as a "black hole" (e.g., Fish, 2011; Noland, 2012; Vavra, 2018). The opacity of the North Korean regime and the inaccessibility of travel to the country for most people, coupled with the public's

desire for more information about North Korea (Fisher, 2013), create an environment in which it is necessary to report on rumors as "improvised news" (Shibutani, 1966).

Constructing knowledge is often the work of cultural and political elites in society, of which journalists are considered a part (Cook, 1998). If journalists' roles are discursively constructed (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), and they are to some degree considered gatekeepers of information (Shoemaker et al., 2001) — although arguably less so with the rise of the internet (Singer, 2006) — then what does that mean for journalists' roles in creating knowledge and information about countries to which the general public has little to no access? This dissertation examines how journalists think about the production processes involved in creating knowledge about North Korea. How do ideas about faraway Others, including knowledge about foreign countries, get constructed for places where the picture in your head (Lippmann, 1992) is the only tangible experience you will have with the place? The following chapters provide insight into the broader xenophobic narratives that inform and constrain how journalists report on North Korea, the way proximity and eyewitnessing are viewed by journalists, and the role of sourcing and expertise in the production of news narratives about the country.

In this introductory chapter, I outline the critiques associated with reporting on North Korea, particularly the coverage of rumors and the tension between the availability of certain kinds of information and audience demand for more news about the nation. Next, I review literature on international journalism to clarify how the term "journalist" is defined in this dissertation to include both foreign correspondents and "local" journalists working for Anglo-Western news organizations. After that, I talk about journalism as a form of knowledge construction, focusing on how journalists' views on eyewitnessing and geographical proximity impact the ways they talk about gathering, interpreting, and narrating information. Then, I

discuss the methodology used to answer my research questions. Finally, I provide an overview of each chapter of the dissertation, outlining how foreign and ethnically Korean journalists working for Anglo-Western news organizations think about the process of creating news narratives about North Korea.

1. Critiques of News Media Coverage of North Korea

Criticisms of media coverage of North Korea have been pervasive among scholars of various disciplines, including historians, political scientists, and former government officials. Scholars have argued that media coverage of North Korea "habitually pillories and stereotypes North Korea" (Cumings, 2013), is full of "global media cliches" (Smith, 2015), and provides a one-note, sensationalistic view of North Korea (Cha & Kang, 2003; Gusterson, 2008). Those that work in the global news making industry suggest that coverage of North Korea "proves sensationalism beats truth" (Broinowski, 2015), that news organizations are interested in "repeating salacious details that portray leader Kim Jong Un as ruthless and unhinged because there is great worldwide interest in it" (Padden, 2016), and that interest in North Korea combined with sensationalism "create a cavernous media echo chamber that provides resonance and substance to rumor and speculation" (Jung, 2014).

This dissertation engages with the criticism leveled at media coverage of North Korea through the framework of a Western imaginary, because the long history of the Korean peninsula relies heavily on an insider/outsider dynamic. In some ways, the exoticization of North Korea can be explained by the fascination with the "Orient" in the "Western" imaginary (Said, 1994). For instance, Dower (1993) traces U.S. scholarly thought and media representations of the Japanese during World War II to illustrate that they were "subhuman, inhuman, lesser human, superhuman — all that was lacking in the perception of the Japanese enemy was a human like

oneself" (p. 9). Dower goes on to contrast portrayals of Japanese people with the way Germans were depicted as the enemy, but still human beings, during the same time period. These kinds of historical observations help build the connections between the Orientalist lineage of thought that vilifies "cultural" difference and present-day media representations of North Korea.

However, that is not to say that the colonial project is only employed by those in the imagined "West." Postcolonial critique of Orientalism problematizes this essentialist version of the "West" (Chibber, 2014), pointing to the agency of the colonized in influencing discourses and institutions, and the importance of not just discourses themselves but their political and societal consequences (Breckenridge & van der Veer, 1993). No discussion of the Koreas is ever complete without acknowledging the role Japanese colonization played in shaping the current state of politics on the peninsula. Although examining Japan's position in the Western imaginary and its role in the journalistic production of knowledge about North Korea is outside of the scope of this research, it is worth noting that the project does not simply think of the "West" as the Anglosphere, but also as any attempt to reproduce discourses that dominate and claim hegemony over the "Orient." Even those who have traditionally been Othered can engage in an 'internalized Orientalism' that serves as "an overarching logic of maintaining the imperial legacy of the global North that has indelibly marked the formation of postcolonial states of the global South" (Alahmed, 2020, p. 409). By examining the different kinds of 'foreign' and 'local' labor in Anglophone media, this dissertation is able to engage this more complex notion of the "West."

Studying the production of knowledge and the construction of North Korea through "Western" discourses provides a way to make connections between discourse and ideology. If hegemony is not natural, but can be won or lost (Hall, 1977), then examining how dominant messages about North Korea are produced can tell us about the material interests and power

structures that influence the language journalists and their sources use to describe North Korea. Hall (1977) argues that through their construction of social knowledge, news media are a site of ideological labor. News media become a place where certain realities are privileged over others, "offering the maps and codes which mark out territories and assign problematic events and relations to explanatory contexts, helping us not simply to *know more* about 'the world' but to *make sense of it*" (Hall, 1977, p. 341).

By examining how journalists talk about the experience of covering North Korea, this study asks how journalists construct knowledge through their imaginations and their social interactions. Journalists' own narratives provide rich material from which we can better understand the role of economic conditions and the ever-present notion of "virality" or the "scoop" in knowledge production. Their narratives also tell us a great deal about the production of rumors as knowledge, especially in the context of North Korea.

1.1 Rumors in News Reporting

The imbalance between the demand for news about North Korea and the supply of verifiable information means that journalists must often grapple with whether to report on a rumor, which DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) define as unverified information used to help people make sense of ambiguous situations and manage threats. Early studies of rumors, particularly the study of wartime rumors during World War II, yielded definitions and typologies for understanding the concept. Allport & Postman (1947) defined rumor as "a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present" (p. ix), while Knapp (1944) argued that wartime rumors thrived "only in periods of social duress" (p. 22). Wartime rumors are considered a victim of the circumstance of information availability and used to undermine the enemy by

shaping public opinion and constraining government officials (Argemi & Fine, 2019).

Subsequent research focusing on the micro-level aspects of rumor suggests that rumors are “public communications that reflect private hypotheses about how the world works" (Rosnow, 1988, p. 12) and that rumor generation and transmission relies on a combination of “personal anxiety, general uncertainty, credulity, and outcome-relevant involvement (Rosnow, 1991, p. 484). One important characteristic of rumors is that they are plausible (Fine & DiFonzo, 2011) and “gain traction because they fit with, and support, the prior convictions of those who accept them” (Sunstein, 2009, p. 4). Rosnow (1980) makes the case for cyclical rumors that become enmeshed in society. These rumors are bolstered by a connection between the univerified information and interest in the rumor among certain members of the public, which DiFonzo, Bordia & Rosnow (1994) refer to as a “rumor public.” According to Fine (2007), “rumors are spread precisely because they support beliefs that make social sense: claims that are too good to be false” (p. 6). Crucially for the purposes of this dissertation, the notion that a rumor is plausible is “embedded within knowledge regimes” and needs to be interpreted through prior knowledge (Fine, 2007, p. 9). In some way, rumors can be “a form of primitive ‘fact-checking’” (Fox, 2020, p. 182) designed to check unverified information against what other people might think. In fact, rumors can be true or false; they are “untested accounts that – when (successfully) investigated – are reclassified as fact or fallacy” (DiFonzo, 2010, p. 1125).

Beyond the individual-level function of rumors as a way to manage anxiety or personal threat, Shibutani’s (1966) sociological study of rumors suggests that when crisis arise and the demand for news is higher than the supply, then rumors are a function of collective problem solving. Rumors become a form of “improvised news” (Shibutani, 1966). According to Firth (1956), the “line between *news*, ideally the reporting of verified events, and *rumor*, the reporting

of unverified events, is a very difficult one to draw" (p. 122). Rosnow & Fine (1976) argue that news media can also contribute to the spread of rumors, sometimes "directing the flow of rumors" (p. 96).

According to Rojecki & Meraz (2016), rumors fall into the larger classification of misinformation. Although the definition of misinformation has been conceptually unclear, Vraga & Bode (2020) suggest a way to understand the concept by taking into account both expertise and evidence. They define misinformation as "information considered incorrect based on the best available evidence from relevant experts at the time" (p. 138). Other related concepts that Rojecki & Meraz (2016) place under the umbrella of misinformation include disinformation, or information anonymously disseminated by government officials to undermine what the public already believes, and propaganda, which is disseminated by government officials to garner public support.

Although this study does not claim to be able to ascertain with certainty whether information about North Korea is rumor, disinformation, or propaganda, clarifying what qualifies as misinformation provides the language to analyze the origins and spread of speculation about North Korea. The language of rumors is often used to describe much of present-day reporting on North Korea, with terms such as "guesspert" making its way into the lexicon of how journalists think about expertise on North Korea (Sharp, personal comm, Nov. 2019). Journalists also describe working to interpret "disinformation" from North Korean state media, similar to the practices Kester (2010) described Dutch journalists using to understand Russian state media. The differences and overlap between how journalists view North Korean state media and other countries' government officials is an important part of parsing out how journalists differentiate between *mis*information and *dis*information. At the heart of many of the critiques of news media

coverage about North Korea are the connections between uncertainty and what qualifies as information that is worthy of news coverage. In this dissertation, although journalists do not always use the term ‘rumor,’ they often discuss information that cannot be independently verified by their news organizations. These rumors can revolve around misinformation, which means the expert community tends to disagree on the veracity of the information in circulation, or disinformation, which is thought to be motivated by self-interest. By relying on expertise, journalists must carefully weigh who can best explain unverified information about North Korea, even though a South Korean expert may use a different set of “political vocabularies” than a U.S. expert to describe North Korea (Robertson, 2019).

Journalists’ tendency to rely on official sources (Sigal, 1973) can lead to the difficult question of whether government officials from countries with a stake in the Korean conflict – including North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – are providing disinformation that is in their national interest. In fact, government officials or those in a position of authority can boost a rumor’s credibility (Coast & Fox, 2015, p. 227). Since North Korean state-run media is often the only source journalists use to reflect the views of the North Korean government, journalists practice a version of “Kremlinology” when reading North Korean news (Cho, 2020). These interpretations of what official sources are saying often mean stories about North Korea are laden with caveats and citations of contradictory reports questioning the veracity of what is being reported. However, economic factors, such as competition among journalists (Tunstall, 1971), the “rhythm of newsmaking” (Tuchman, 1978), and changes in the media landscape to accommodate the 24-hour news cycle (Weeber, Turner & Durkin, 2005), become the basis for news that values timeliness and audience interest over veracity. In the context of North Korea, as is true with international reporting, it can be easy to simplify the

narrative and caricature the place journalists are covering because "audiences have no way of personally verifying reports about distant places" (Louw, 2004, p. 153). Nothias (2020) argues that technology is changing journalists' accountability for their work, pointing to an example of a correspondent who was not a careful notetaker during interviews until technology made it possible for local audiences to push back on foreign correspondents' reporting. Since North Korea reporting rarely gets pushback from the regime or from news audiences, there is little accountability for journalists who choose to report on unverified information – even if the consensus in the expert community is that the rumor is misinformation.

Rumors often carry significant weight because the Korean peninsula remains at war, with no peace treaty signed between the North and South. In wartime, rumors are often "deliberately created and spread" (Argemi & Fine, 2019) and sometimes informed by disinformation from anonymous government sources or entangled with propaganda from the warring governments (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016). Rosnow & Fine (1976) point out that rumors about coups, or the illness or death of world leaders, are a news media mainstay; this is particularly true when the world leader is absent from a special occasion with no explanation (p. 97). However, rumors about North Korea are not always overtly political in nature, but often take on a gossip-like quality, focusing on the private, individual behaviors (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007) of the members of the Kim regime. This includes rumors about Kim Jong-Il's golf prowess – multiple holes-in-one during his first-ever golf game (Sens, 2016) – and extends to Kim Jong-Un imposing state-approved haircuts on ordinary citizens (Uffalussy, 2017) and his purported "Pleasure Squad" of women that sing, dance, and perform sexual acts (Fredericks, 2020).

In late 2013, when rumors about Kim Jong-Un demoting and purging his uncle, Jang Song-Thaek, were at their peak, media outlets ranged in their suggestions of how he may have

been executed — from a pack of hungry dogs (Cheong, 2013; Baculinao & Smith, 2014) to firing squads (Simpson, 2014). Over the years, rumors about other execution methods that Kim Jong-Un used to purge high-ranking officials and ordinary citizens included mortar rounds fired at close range (Madden, 2012), a firing squad of machine guns (Besant, 2013), a flamethrower (McCoy, 2014), an anti-aircraft gun (McCurry, 2015), and poisoning (Hancocks, 2015). Although some of these rumors turn out to be true, the reports that Jang Song-Thaek was eaten by dogs was traced back to a Chinese blogger (Calamur, 2014) and the rumors about Kim Jong-Un's health problems seem to have originated from a single-source (and later corrected) DailyNK report that claimed Kim Jong-Un had undergone heart surgery (Ah, 2020).

Deciding which rumors are newsworthy extends beyond just the content of the rumor. The insidious quality of rumors is their ability to acquire power through familiarity; even when corrections are issued, they only serve to help the audience remember the rumor (Berinsky, 2017). Through this dissertation, I will explore how journalists' discourse about North Korea-related rumors, and the sourcing practices associated with reporting on rumors, play a role in producing a particular kind of knowledge about the country. I hope to explicate how knowledge, in the form of rumor, is produced and spread through international news media.

2. Journalists and International News

North Korea is a country that most people will never get to visit. Who decides what is knowledge about North Korea and what gets disseminated to the public? When we do not have first-hand experience, people rely on news media for knowledge about international events and foreign policy (Horvit, 2006). In this dissertation, I narrow down 'news media' to legacy news media organizations, such as Anglo-Western wire agencies, newspapers, broadcasters, and online news organizations, that are building knowledge about North Korea through their news

reporting. However, the focus of the dissertation is not on the organizations themselves, but on how journalists talk about working within a specific set of conditions to create knowledge about North Korea. By examining journalists' discourse on various aspects of journalistic work in relation to North Korea, it becomes clear that journalism is "a variable practice situated within shifting social, economic, and technological contexts" (Carlson, 2016, p. 354). Conceptualizing journalism as a "dynamic set of practices and expectations" creates an opportunity to understand how journalism functions in the context of North Korea coverage (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 177).

Without firsthand access to North Korea, mediated encounters with North Korea become important, whether through news media or popular culture. Baum and Potter (2008) argue that mass media, including news producers, plays an important part in sourcing, framing, and distributing information about foreign policy, given the information gap between government officials who implement foreign policy and the public. Louw (2004) conjectures that "news consumers become virtually entirely dependent on the news media to help them make sense of those distant places they themselves have no direct access to" (p. 151). Journalists become an essential part of interpreting and spreading ideas about a place through news narratives and images. McNair (2005) describes the role of a journalist as an 'information architect,' or someone who creates reality, instead of reflecting that reality.

The study of the production of international news, or foreign correspondence, involves a broad understanding of how international newsrooms function (Boyd-Barrett, 1980), including the history of foreign correspondence (Hamilton, 2009), organizational structures (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Williams, 2011), actual journalistic practice (Pedelty, 1995; Hannerz, 2004), and trends in foreign correspondence (Paterson & Sreberny, 2004). Studies of foreign

correspondents have concentrated on their individual characteristics (Weaver, 1998), including "cosmopolitanism" among foreign correspondents (Hannerz, 2007; Cottle, 2013) and the biases that correspondents carry into a foreign context (Louw, 2004). Some scholars have argued that foreign correspondence is declining, given technology and globalization (Utley 1997; Moore 2010; Sambrook 2010). More recently, scholars are reconceptualizing foreign correspondence (Archetti, 2012), particularly examining the hierarchies present in international news production between foreign correspondents and local journalistic laborers (Bunce, 2010, 2015; Murrell, 2014; Palmer, 2018b; Palmer, 2018c; Palmer 2019a; Palmer, 2019b; Seo, 2016). Contemporary scholarly literature on international reporting recognizes that not all journalistic labor is considered equal (Bunce, 2010; Seo, 2016; Palmer, 2018b; Palmer 2018c; Palmer 2019a; Palmer, 2019b).

This dissertation examines the distinctions and overlaps between local South Korean journalists, ethnically Korean journalists, and foreign correspondents. By problematizing the dichotomous distinction made between local journalist and foreign correspondent (Palmer, 2019a), I am able to disentangle how journalists' ascribed and avowed identities seem to influence their discussions of practicing journalism, such as how they conceive of eyewitnessing or their approach to sourcing. Through these discussions, I aim to highlight the tensions and the liminality associated with being a "local" or "ethnically Korean" journalist working at an Anglo-Western news organization. Although there are some simple distinctions to be made, such as the prevalence of local journalists working as news assistants and foreign correspondents working as bureau chiefs, these differences in position within the journalistic labor market raise questions about privilege and agency (Bunce, 2015). The role of White privilege in foreign correspondence (Gabay, 2018), along with differences in language abilities, sources, contextual knowledge, and

individual opinions (Bunce, 2015), provides the backdrop for understanding the different places that local South Korean and other ethnically Korean voices occupy in Seoul's media landscape. Exploring how ethnically Korean journalists employed at Anglo-Western news organizations perform their work is particularly useful for understanding the layered dynamics in international news production. By studying the journalists working to produce international news, this dissertation conceptualizes journalism as a form of knowledge production.

3. Journalism as Knowledge Production

Understanding international news as knowledge production requires an examination of the structures and routines of journalism practice. Deuze (2005) theorizes journalism as an "occupational ideology," or a shared set of beliefs that provide meaning to those who practice it. Journalists decide what to report (Gans, 1979) based on the events that occur (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), journalistic norms (Ryan, 1991), and larger societal factors that influence media organizations (Wolfsfeld, 2011). These ideas are best summed up by Hall et al. (1978) in describing the social production of news as "the bureaucratic organisation of the media" into categories, and "the structure of news values," which creates an order and rank for stories inside of these categories (p. 54). However, the basis for understanding "journalism as a practice of knowledge production" (Skinner et al., 2001, p. 353) is based on Hall et al.'s (1978) third observation about how the news is presented to audiences in a way that labels events to make them comprehensible to their audiences. Since journalists are identifying and contextualizing the events, places, and people in society, they provide an incomplete picture of what is happening – a "window on the world" that is produced through socialization and routinization (Tuchman, 1978), or an adherence to a set of values that govern the production of news. In this sense, journalism is understood as "an institutional practice of representation" that goes beyond skills

and routines to making and circulating meaning within society (Skinner et al., 2001).

However, this is at odds with the Western notion of the journalist as an objective, impartial witness to events (e.g., Tuchman, 1978). But objectivity in journalism, just as in academic research, can be thought of as a myth (Sigelman, 1973), and does not provide ample explanation of the way words are encoded with meaning by the producer but can also be decoded by audiences (Hall, 1980). DeBeer (2004) describes news as “an attempt by individual journalists and their media organizations to capture the essential framework of particular events and trends by *retelling* them in the form of news reports” (p. 167). This retelling is done within a particular context — cultural, political, economic – and within the confines of the journalist’s organization, which has specific cultures, policies, structures, and audiences in place. Just as the definition of journalism “is not in fact consensual” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 13), news values like objectivity requires clarification because the journalists who actually practice them have differing understands of the values themselves (Donsbach & Klett, 1993).

If the media are “important sites of the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies” (Hall, 1981, p. 34), then journalists are the actors that put these ideologies into words. Examining journalistic practice and how it contributes to knowledge production reveals the hegemonic ideologies in a society, or the “morphing and masked forms of power within a globalizing world” (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018, p. 349). In other words, the limitations of language and the parameters set by already-existing discourse, constrains how people perceive the world. These constraints often occur in the form of images and stereotypes that are familiar to media producers and audiences. The scholarly critiques of news media coverage about North Korea are related to dominant narratives that pervade news accounts of the nation. The way journalists see the world and interpret events for their audiences are informed by the news values

used to guide their journalistic practice. As Caple & Bednarek (2016) suggest, there is a clear difference between the aims of news writing, the selection factors that go into what becomes a news story, and the values that inform the designation of newsworthiness. News values, and peoples' conceptions of their role as a journalist, influence their reporting practices. Doxic, or unspoken news values, often go undisputed (Schultz, 2007). In the North Korea context, these doxic news values are the dominant narratives that journalists use to characterize their experience of reporting on the country. Therefore, the first research question explored in this dissertation is as follows.

> **RQ_1:** Which narratives about North Korea do journalists privilege the most, and in what ways do journalists foreground identity in these narratives? How do journalists justify the use of these narratives?

In the case of North Korea, journalists are often aware of sensationalistic and reductive reporting on the country and its leadership (e.g., Fifield, 2019b; Koo, 2020; Kretschmer, 2019; Padden, 2016). Drew (2011) argues that reflexivity can "challenge the methods of knowledge production and the values undergirding this process" (p. 370), including how journalists view practices like eyewitnessing and proximity.

3.1 Eyewitnessing and Proximity in International News

Eyewitnessing plays a role of critical importance in international news coverage, particularly for reporting on places and events where "audiences have no first-hand knowledge of what is being reported" (Zelizer, 2007, p. 411). Zelizer (2007) argues that eyewitnessing is useful in instances when something "cannot easily be confirmed, challenged, or tested but are made more credible by virtue of a correspondent's on-site presence" (p. 411). This makes the practice of eyewitness a key part of foreign correspondence, where a journalist's physical presence and ability to eyewitness imbues the journalist with authority. The act of being there

and seeing is even more important for conflict correspondents, who become "professional eyewitnesses" that can relay what they saw "for distant viewers, who usually cannot inhabit these dangerous spaces on their own" (Palmer, 2018a, p. 138).

In the digital age, eyewitnessing has expanded beyond the purview of professional journalists to encompass citizen journalists. This was an especially important development, considering "foreign news is one of the *most* expensive journalistic undertakings and one of the *least* rewarding in terms of audience interest" (Hamilton, 2009, p. 460). For example, journalists who cover North Korea for Anglophone news organizations work in a variety of locations outside of North Korea, including the United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. Photographs and videos captured by citizens provide perspectives that news producers do not have access to, particularly when it comes to war (Allan, 2013). However, as Palmer (2013) pointed out in her analysis of CNN's iReport, professional journalists "simultaneously celebrated and denigrated" citizen journalism as an important way to "facilitate first-person accounts of certain events," but problematic because of "citizen journalists' inability to objectively make sense of their own video" (p. 372). Professional journalists wrestled with questions of "credibility, subjectivity, and diminished reliability" related to eyewitnessing (Zelizer, 2007, p. 412), particularly because they viewed their role as an interpreter of events for their audiences. The underlying interpretations that professional journalists believed they should make as part of their eyewitnessing practice was also a way for them to gatekeep how audiences understood what they saw.

Wall's (2019) definition of citizen journalism as goal-oriented, aiming to "contribute to the building of community and sometimes to social change" (p. 4) provides an explanation for why professional journalists may problematize the practice of objective eyewitnessing for those

outside of the journalism field. Citizen journalists may have a particular agenda, which runs anathema to Western journalism's fabled value of objectivity. Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013) suggest that "eyewitness footage shot by 'ordinary' people at the scene of crisis events suggests that these visual testimonies have the potential to push the boundaries of the profession of journalism such as impartiality, verification and professional exclusivity" (p. 964).

The North Korean context challenges professional and citizen journalists alike. Citizen journalists for outlets such as *Rimjin-gang*, a magazine launched in 2007 that relies on citizen journalism, often work in isolation, use pseudonyms, get paid very little, and worst of all, risk their lives (Chiu, 2010). The problem of access to North Korea also makes it difficult for professional journalists to eyewitness inside of the country. When journalists can obtain a visa and travel to North Korea, "the conditions surrounding their work – and the concessions they are willing to make – have come under scrutiny" (Seo, 2019). One of the conditions is surveillance, particularly the constant presence of a minder/fixer assigned to each journalist that visits North Korea (Seo, 2019). In fact, Seo (2020) finds that "new" foreign correspondents operating in difficult environments, such as North Korea and Iran, prefer to use digital platforms as a primary source and a way to virtually witness what is happening. Seo (2020) argues that with these constraints, an "alternative hierarchy of sources" is developed based on photographs and videos gathered online, versus the more traditionally valued eyewitness testimonies and secondhand accounts (p. 295). Given the limitations to professional eyewitnessing from inside of North Korea, this dissertation interrogates how journalists consider the practice of eyewitnessing and its value for North Korea coverage.

> **RQ2**: How do foreign correspondents and local English-language journalists describe the role of geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity? In turn, how do they describe the constraints they face, in the practice of eyewitnessing? What role does their cultural identity play in the way they value proximity to the story?

The specific constraints that journalists covering North Korea face are related to the larger political context of reporting on a country that is largely closed off to journalists. One of the important things at stake with the lack of opportunities to eyewitness in North Korea is journalism's reliance on secondhand sources. Lack of access demands that journalists value secondhand information, while simultaneously limiting source options. In other countries where press freedoms are heavily restricted, journalists adjust their practices to fit the context. As Kester (2010) explains about reporting in the Russian context, journalists use various strategies to work around their constraints, such as a relying on press conferences, experts, open-source material, and observations of everyday life. Journalists engage in a great deal of interpretation, "weigh[ing] their sources constantly" and "read[ing] between the lines of Russian news reports" (p. 65). Journalists' views on sourcing play an important role in how they understand North Korea and convey that understanding to their audiences.

3.2 Sourcing

The constraints on geographical proximity to breaking news coming out of North Korea means that sourcing practices play an outsized role in news about the country. Examining how journalists think about finding sources, and what kinds of sources they value, give us insight into who journalists are getting information from and what kind of information informs their reporting (Carlson, 2009; Gans, 1979). Leon Sigal (1986) argues that "news is, after all, not what journalists think, but what their sources say" (p. 29). Sourcing choices can determine what kinds of people, perspectives, and ideas make it into media reports. The kinds of institutions and viewpoints journalists typically cite tell us what kind of information is privileged, legitimized, and produced into mass-consumable knowledge.

Sources can shape how journalists understand issues (Seib, 2002) and serve to reflect and

maintain existing political hierarchies (McQuail, 2003). Cross (2010) suggests that "journalists rely on sources, at least in part, to symbolically (rather than substantively) represent the story they have already chosen to tell" (p. 428). Some scholars have considered the selection of news sources a way to frame the stories they are telling, such as using credible sources to influence how certain issues are perceived (Druckman, 2001). In fact, journalists tend to view elite sources as credible (Hall et al., 1978) and rely heavily on routine sources (Sigal, 1986; Allgaier, 2011), because their previous interactions with these sources mean they view them as more credible (Reich, 2011). Ordinary citizens rarely serve as news sources because contacting them requires significant effort, so it is easier to use them on an ad hoc basis, and also because their contribution is not valued as much as more authoritative sources (Reich, 2015).

In the North Korea context, ordinary citizen accounts usually come from North Korean refugee/defector testimony. The terms "refugee" and "defector" are used interchangeably in this dissertation, with the acknowledgement that the terms are also imbued with a particular ideological understanding of leaving North Korea. The prominence of some North Korean defectors, who have become authors, South Korean politicians, and even journalists, presents an interesting quandary about their simultaneous status as a vulnerable population and as elites that participate in constructing North Korea to outsiders. However, relying on North Korean defectors as sources brings up "serious methodological issues in collecting, organizing, and interpreting information derived from defectors' accounts" (Song & Denney, 2019, p. 451). It also raises questions about how North Korean defectors function on the periphery as suppliers of data for journalists and researchers to consume, but are not incorporated into producing the theory and methodologies that get "exported to the periphery" (Connell, 2014).

Scholars have overwhelmingly concluded that there is a "hierarchy of credibility"

(Manning, 2001) visible in journalists' reliance on official sources, particularly government officials (Bennett et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2007; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005; Gans, 1979; Hallin, 1986; Sigal, 1973, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). This hierarchy often "flags the nation" (Billig, 1995), placing sources from their home country's government at the top. This holds true in Japanese and South Korean media (Yoon & Gwangho, 2002) as well as in reporting about U.S. and South Korean journalists' coverage of the six-party talks, where Seo & Lim (2010) found that South Korean and U.S. journalists believed government officials from their home country were the most credible. In addition, they found journalists considered government officials highly credible when they shared a similar stance on North Korea with officials from their home country.

The norms of journalistic practice often influence source choice, with journalists commonly choosing sources that are accessible, eloquent, follow news routines, and are open to public engagement (Allgaier 2011; Kruvand, 2012). Although journalists acknowledge the limitations of deadlines, editors' accuracy, and the "quest for sensationalism," they are accepting of how the structure of their work impacts source selection (Maillé et al., 2010). In addition, journalists' individual characteristics, such as their specialization or beat, views on objectivity and balance in reporting (Allgaier, 2011), and whether they have formal journalism training (Wien, 2014), influence who they choose to quote in their reporting. Wien (2014) finds that university-trained journalists tend to value researchers. International journalists often choose to work with people they are culturally comfortable with, such as expatriate communities (Van Ginneken, 1998; Louw, 2004), which can limit their pool of sources. In foreign correspondence, journalists form expatriate communities and develop competitor-colleague relationships (Tunstall, 1971) with their counterparts at other Anglo-Western news organizations. Journalists

not only compete with one another, but also exchange information both formally, through pool reporting and group associations such as the Seoul Foreign Correspondents Club (SFCC) or the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), and informally, through interpersonal relationships and more recently, through interactions on social media.

The literature on the significant role sources play in journalism inspires the third research question explored in this dissertation:

> **RQ$_3$**: How do journalists think about sourcing, in light of the dominant narrative of scarce information? What kinds of sources do local journalists and foreign correspondents consider authoritative and credible in their news narratives about North Korea?

I rely on conversations with journalists to answer the three research questions outlined in this introduction.

4. Methodology

Taking a qualitative approach to answering questions about journalists and the production of knowledge about North Korea, this dissertation relies on the stories journalists tell about the work they do. These conversations contain rich data that helps us understand how journalists interpret their own work, creating opportunities for "the exploration of the process of human meaning making" (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 455). Journalists' narratives about their own work are an entry point into how they function within their political, professional, and cultural contexts to create news narratives about North Korea. Through in-depth interviews, we can more fully understand journalists' discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984), or their verbal expressions of how they think they engage in the practice of journalism. Chatting with journalists about North Korea provides insight into the most salient narratives they use to talk about North Korea and how they characterize news media's role in creating and disseminating information about North Korea to their audiences.

For this dissertation, I conducted 54 in-depth interviews with journalists and experts who either collaborated closely with journalists or had been a part of news media organizations themselves. The journalists I spoke with included foreign correspondents, local South Korean journalists, and ethnically Korean journalists who were currently employed (at the time of the interview) or had previously been employed at Anglophone news outlets in Seoul. Many of these news outlets were larger wire agencies with Seoul bureaus, mainstream international news organizations, Anglophone newspapers, and some niche news outlets focused on North Korea-related news. Although this dissertation focuses on Anglophone media, my interviewees included several journalists who were part of the community of Anglo-Western journalists in Seoul. They conducted the bulk of their reporting in English but produced content for their 'home audiences' in languages such as German or Spanish. Since these journalists were part of this expatriate journalist community, they provided as much insight into the culture of Anglo-Western journalism as those working at Anglophone news organizations in Seoul.

The local South Korean journalists I spoke for this study were staff members – news assistants or correspondents – at Anglophone news organizations. They ranged from journalists who had previously worked for South Korean news media outlets before moving to their current role at an Anglophone news outlet or had previously worked as a fixer or stringer for Anglophone news organizations. Although many of the journalists interviewed were staff journalists or bureau chiefs at legacy news media organizations, I also spoke to a number of foreign freelance journalists who had worked with a variety of Anglophone news media organizations during their time in Seoul. This is an important part of understanding North Korea news media coverage as well, because many Anglo-Western news organizations cannot devote the resources to having a dedicated bureau or correspondent in Seoul. Although foreign freelance

journalists engage in contingent labor, just like local stringers and fixers do, they also occupy a different place in the socio-cultural hierarchy. They are the liaisons between their editors and home audiences but are at the same time grappling with the real economic concerns of how to land the next freelance gig.

The journalists themselves run the gamut from long-timers that have been in Seoul for over a decade to those newly arrived in Seoul mere months before we spoke. They range in job title and career stage, from fixer-turned-staff journalist to long-time foreign correspondents who had been posted in other parts of the world before landing in Seoul. This variation was important for the study because journalistic coverage of North Korea is not solely the creation of seasoned national security reporters in Washington, D.C. or "spiralist" foreign correspondents (Hannerz, 2004) that rotate through Seoul on a temporary basis. North Korea media coverage is the product of other forms of labor, such as freelancers, fixers, and stringers who work in Seoul, as well as foreign correspondents and "local" journalists working in other parts of Asia. There are also experts that regularly contribute content to news media organizations, in the form of op-eds and other commentary, or who work closely in advisory roles with news outlets.

Although I do not want to put my interviewees into highly discrete, reductive categories, I also want to provide a sense of how we can understand the role ascribed and avowed identity plays in journalistic practice. My interviewees included 41 male-identifying journalists and 13 female-identifying journalists. Most of these journalists (35) would be racialized as white, 18 would consider themselves ethnically Korean, with only one journalist identifying as another Asian ethnicity. The interviewees skewed heavily white and male (31), with only a few white female (4) journalists. The most prevalent national identities that journalists claimed was

American, then British, which helps explain this dissertation's emphasis on Anglo-Western news organizations, values, and ways of understanding North Korea.

Among ethnically Korean interviewees, there was an even split in gender identification; 9 male-identifying and 9 female-identifying journalists. Since many of the journalists I interviewed chose to remain anonymous, I am not able to openly discuss some of the nuanced ways in which journalists identified themselves. This is particularly true for the ethnically Korean journalists since this ambiguously broad category includes local South Korean journalists and journalists who ethnically identify as Korean but claim another national identity. Throughout the dissertation, the nuances of how journalists chose to describe their Korean ethnicity, such as how they developed Korean language skills or how much they identified culturally with "being Korean," will play an important role in discussions of culture, language, and journalism practice. However, there are other important nuanced views of how journalists were ascribed identities, or how they claimed certain kinds of cultural or linguistic knowledge, that I am not able to talk about at length without compromising anonymity. For those reasons, some of my descriptions may appear vague.

Participants were recruited in several different ways. I cold contacted journalists after conducting a Factiva search to determine whose bylines came up repeatedly in North Korea-related news and by observing journalists who actively talked about North Korea on Twitter. I also used the snowball method for recruitment. After making initial contact with a number of journalists, I fostered new connections by asking them to refer me to others. Sometimes, they were curious who I had spoken to already and because the community of journalists working at Anglo-Western news outlets in Seoul is quite small, word spread about my interviews in smaller pockets of the larger community. I am thankful for the graciousness of these journalists, who

were often willing to suggest new names, connect me to their networks, and encouraged me to reach out to others who were knowledgeable about North Korea and newsmaking. The interviews took place between 2017 and 2020 and were primarily conducted in Seoul, South Korea, in the ubiquitous cafes, over a beer or a delicious meal, or in the journalist's office. Interviews conducted in newsrooms provided an important opportunity to observe some of the dynamics between, for example, a foreign correspondent and their news assistant. Some of the interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, FaceTime, or Skype, as the journalists were located in other parts of Asia or in the United States. The bulk of the interviews were conducted in English, except for two that were conducted in Korean at the request of the interviewee. The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to four hours, with one group interview that involved two journalists from the same news organization.

In conducting these interviews, I followed a semi-structured format, asking general questions about how they came to be a journalist, about the media organization(s) they work for, and their level of experience with the Koreas. I also asked more specific questions related to their journalism practice and North Korea, such as how they decide what to write (e.g., frames, topics), how they view their role as a journalist covering North Korea, and what they think about the criticisms leveled at news coverage of the country. I wanted to know their thoughts on access, including how important it was for news organizations to have a physical presence in North Korea and ways to gain access when official sources were unavailable. In addition, I inquired about how journalists went about finding sources and how they determined which sources they valued over others. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed interviewees to influence the direction our discussions took. Working from a set of broad

questions, interviewees were able to engage more deeply with questions and topics that interested them, opening up space for unexpected and interesting conversations.

In addition to describing the interviewees for this project, it is important to acknowledge that "[p]articipants' ideas of *why* we, as researchers, research certain subjects is therefore of key importance when considering who we interview, and why they might want to be interviewed" (Riach, 2009, p. 363). I identify as a cis-gender Korean American female who was born and predominantly educated in the U.S., while growing up in a Korean immigrant household. I spoke both English and Korean at home, but also received formal Korean language education as an undergraduate at both a U.S. institution of higher education and at Yonsei University in South Korea. My identities, and the way that my interviewees perceived them, played a role in understanding which journalists agreed to be interviewed and how interviewees responded to the questions. Since "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (Smith, 2012, p. 5), I continually reflected throughout this project on how my identities — both ascribed and avowed — were not separate from the collection and interpretation of the conversations I had with journalists. As Cramer (2016) points out, research that involves interactions and conversations with other people calls for the researcher to "pay attention to my own identities and make sense of how they affected what I observed" (p. 28).

Mukherjee (2017) argues that in an interview, positionality is contingent on "relational understandings" (p. 292) and "contextualized according to specific socio-spatial power relations within which participants are embedded" (p. 293). My own position as a younger Korean American female provides multiple points of relation to my interviewees as both an insider and an outsider, which can be "strategically useful during fieldwork" (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 293).

Simultaneously being an insider and an outsider is a key part of understanding these interviews, given that I identify as Korean American, can speak English and Korean, and that our interactions took place in Seoul. I was educated and acculturated in the United States but grew up in a Korean immigrant household. I can pass as South Korean because of my appearance and language skills, but in other ways, I do not fit into the norms that govern South Korean society because of the way I dress, talk, and carry myself.

This perpetual juxtaposition of both insider and outsider status, which is something I experience even outside of the interview context, is part of the "relational and unstable process" of my positionality in these interviews (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 296), and are subject to change based on the differing power dynamics between my own identities and my interviewees' identities. These dynamics played out in who was willing to speak with me for an interview, what kinds of interactions we had during the interview, and the kinds of topics we discussed. Reflecting on these interviews, I found that my identities made some of these conversations easier. Interviews with Korean American females, or even South Korean women that had spent substantial time in the United States, were often punctuated with discussions about perceptions of the Korean peninsula based on our lived experiences and our shared identity as both Korean and American. Knowing what it feels like to work and live within a predominantly white society as a Korean American female is a very specific experience that I believe was reflected in these conversations.

My Anglo-Western education and my American identity may also have made it easier for non-Korean journalists to feel comfortable talking more candidly about features of Korean society they may not have been comfortable discussing with a South Korean interviewer. I also think that my ethnic Korean identity played a role in the interviews I had with South Korean

journalists. They may have viewed me as both an insider and outsider, which could inform the perspectives they felt comfortable sharing with me or felt needed more explanation because I did not grow up in South Korea. These conversations may have gone in other directions and provided different insights had I been a white male or even a South Korean female. The insights that I gained from these interviews are largely because of the open and self-reflexive way in which journalists answered questions, willing to respond to and reflect on criticism about how Anglophone news media covers North Korea.

When I stopped collecting interviews, I had reached a point of saturation where I was hearing many of the same things from interviewees. After transcribing the interviews using both a paid transcription service, as well as ExpressScribe transcription software and a foot pedal, I input the data into MAXQDA to code for themes and patterns in the transcripts and in my field notes from the interviews. This dissertation closely examines the patterns I found in journalists' descriptions of how they cover North Korea. Throughout my dissertation, I rely on these interviews to answer the questions about how journalists articulate their experience covering a geopolitically closed society like North Korea, their perception of eyewitnessing and proximity in journalism about the country, and the outsized role of sourcing in North Korea coverage.

5. Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1, I begin by providing the context for this dissertation with an overview of English-language social science literature on media coverage of North Korea. Beginning with the historical context of Orientalist representations during World War II and the Korean War, Chapter 1 builds on the scholarship about the framing of and discourse on North Korea to tease out the issues involved in producing knowledge about North Korea. Existing scholarship mainly relies on content analyses to study media coverage of North Korea. This research expands on the

important work that has already been done, using interviews with journalists to broaden our understanding of how knowledge about North Korea is produced. This dissertation is being written at a time when scholarship about North Korea, particularly among journalism and media scholars, is growing (Seo & Nah, 2020). By engaging with the insights built over the years by scholars in various disciplines, as well as their assessments of the knowledge that journalists produce about North Korea, this chapter creates the backdrop for the dissertation.

Chapter 2 identifies the dominant narratives (RQ_1) that guide local South Korean, ethnically Korean, and foreign journalists' practices, both in gathering information and creating news narratives about North Korea. The two salient narratives that emerged in conversations with journalists were 1) the naturalization of a Cold War ideology when talking about North Korea itself and 2) a narrative of scarce information when it comes to reporting on North Korea. This chapter examines how these dominant narratives both inform and constrain how journalism is practiced when covering North Korea, particularly news coverage of rumors. Although rumors are pervasive in journalism about North Korea, they have not been extensively studied in scholarly literature about media coverage of North Korea. By talking to the key actors who gather and interpret information on North Korea, Chapter 2 provides a look at the logics that journalists use to make sense of information about North Korea. Interviews with journalists also provide insight into the role that self-reflexivity plays in how journalists think about these dominant narratives.

In Chapter 3, I answer the question of how journalists view eyewitnessing and proximity in reporting on North Korea (RQ_2). Taking into account the overarching narrative of scarce information and the real constraints of geographically proximate reporting, this chapter examines how journalists talk about the practice of eyewitnessing in the North Korean context. Journalists'

articulations of their ambivalence toward eyewitnessing helps us understand the way constraints to geographical proximity influence the value they place on "being there." It also becomes clear that journalists view proximity not just in the geographical sense, but value eyewitnessing in different ways based on cultural and linguistic proximity

Building on the privileging of certain kinds of eyewitnessing over others, Chapter 4 focuses on journalists' discussion of their sourcing practices. This chapter answer the question of what kinds of sources are valued over others in news coverage of North Korea (RQ_3) and the way sourcing can shape and be constrained by news narratives about the country. Journalists create a hierarchy for sourcing that places official sources at the top, despite limited access to North Korean officials. Similar to the ambivalence journalists expressed about eyewitnessing, they also present a complex picture of the value refugee/defector sources provide in reporting on North Korea. This chapter also argues that the competitor-colleague relationship (Tunstall, 1971) between journalists covering North Korea, especially the need for speed among outlets that typically do not cover breaking news, creates an environment where rumors can flourish and news media become important sources for information about North Korea.

Finally, the conclusion to this dissertation summarizes my findings. I connect journalists' narratives about North Korea itself and the dominant narratives they use to describe covering North Korea to journalists' ambivalence about eyewitnessing. The conclusion will also make clear how geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity influence how journalists value sources. Ultimately, this dissertation explores how knowledge about countries that reside in one's imaginary are constructed by journalists. By examining journalists' narratives about North Korea itself and what they perceive as important to producing news about the country, this study aims to shed light on the ideologies and logics embedded in journalistic knowledge about North

Korea. In some ways, these questions are specific to North Korea and its opacity, because of the real limitations to eyewitnessing. But in other ways, North Korea is the backdrop for understanding the nature of Anglophone journalistic practice and what kinds of dominant Anglo-Western values, routines, and logics are embedded in journalists' understanding of their own practice. Both the real and imagined narrative of scarce information also highlights the complex relationships journalists have with their sources, particularly when it comes to international journalism. By examining discursive practices, this study will help us better understand how journalists produce this information and how sources shape the information that creates the images of North Korea dominating Anglophone news narratives. The interplay between what journalists think about North Korea, their self-reflexivity about journalistic practice in the North Korean context, and their privileging of certain ways of knowing, all contribute to what we know about North Korea, a place where second-hand information often provides the entirety of our perceptions.

Chapter 1: Background

The idea that people outside of the North Korea — even those who visit or live there — are operating in an information-scarce environment is fairly ubiquitous. News reports about North Korea, also known as the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), often claim to provide an "inside" look, highlighting the secretive, hermit-like nature of the DPRK. Articles promise to tell us "[w]hat life for a rare foreign student in Pyongyang reveals about the reclusive country" (Haddou & Winsor, 2019) or suggest they can "offer a glimpse at rarely-seen lives" gained through "unprecedented access" (Boelpap & Jaramillo, 2020). Social media, particularly Instagram, provides a look at "life from inside secretive North Korea," with photojournalists, tour companies, and even tourists sharing photos taken from their time visiting, living, and working in the country (Carson, 2016). Outside of North Korea, public knowledge about the North Korea largely exists through news media coverage.

After years of reporting on North Korea, some journalists go on to author books about the country, many of which rely on defector testimony to flesh out their own observations and experiences (e.g., Demick, 2009; Fifield, 2019a; Harden, 2012; Kim, S., 2014; Lee, 2010; Martin, 2004; Oberdorfer, 1997; Tudor & Pearson, 2015). North Koreans who have escaped from the country pen first-person accounts of their lives in North Korea (e.g., Kang & Rigoulot 2001; Kim & Falletti, 2015; Lee & John, 2015; Park & Vollers, 2015). Scholars and experts on North Korea also publish books that explore the country's history (Cumings, 1997; 2003; Lankov, 2013), market conditions (Haggard & Noland, 2007), human rights (Fahy, 2015; 2019), information flows (Baek, 2016; Myers, 2010), and global politics (Cha & Kang, 2003; Cha, 2012; Pak, 2021; Panda, 2020).

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center showed that the U.S. public's views on North

Korea remain consistently negative over time, especially when compared to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan, India, and China (Moncus & Silver, 2021). A 2013 Pew Research Center poll indicated that 36% of the U.S. public were "paying very close attention to news about North Korea's military threats and plans to restart its nuclear reactor" (Pew Research Center, 2013). According to the same report, North Korea's military and nuclear threats were "the most closely followed foreign news story of the year" (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Perhaps this hyperawareness of North Korea was related to the fact that 2013 was a busy year for the nation. In 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test, Dennis Rodman visited North Korea, and rumors abounded about Kim Jong-Un's consolidation of power and execution of his uncle-in-law, Jang Song-Thaek. Given the appetite for news about North Korea and the outsized amount of attention the country receives from news organizations ranging from legacy media outlets to tabloids, examining news representations of North Korea provides important insight into the ways journalists not just imagine, but actually frame and narrate North Korea for news audiences. Examining journalism as "a realm of culturally and politically inflected knowledge production" (Creech, 2015, p. 1011) provides an opportunity to understand how "journalistic texts create perceptions surrounding events but also how those events interface with the methods of journalism in the first place" (p. 1013).

This chapter sets the foundation for the rest of the dissertation, starting off by situating media coverage of North Korea within the larger historical context of Asian representations during World War II and Korean War, then moving on to more contemporary 21st century understandings of North Korea. Then, I engage in a discussion of research on Anglo-Western representations of North Korea. I start by reviewing scholarly literature on the dominant narratives scholars observe being used to describe North Korea, then explore how journalists'

selection and presentation of information reflect their understanding of the "reality" of North Korea. Next, I provide an overview of the structural barriers and issues faced by media organizations and individual journalists covering the country. The quandary of access to information relates to how external constraints impact journalists' ability to see North Korea firsthand. Finally, I address the factors that influence how journalists gather information about North Korea, especially the reliance on secondhand sources for information. This discussion considers the problematic way sources influence media coverage of North Korea (Sigal, 1998).

Woven into this discussion is the important work that has already been accomplished in North Korea-related communication research. As Armstrong (2011) suggests, English-language scholarship about North Korea has flourished since the 1990s in a variety of disciplines. Seo & Nah's (2020) systematic review of communication research about North Korea finds that much of this scholarship focuses on journalistic content and published after 2009, which means that research on North Korea "has just gotten started" (p. 1320).

1. Historical Legacies of the Asian Other

Edward Said (1994) argued that Orientalism is part of the colonial project of producing knowledge where the "West" is imagined as rational and the "the Middle East" is represented in reductive ways. Said implicates the news media in producing this kind of essentializing knowledge, based on a Western gaze. This limited way of knowing can also provide narrow ways of studying and interpreting world events, such as the Arab Spring (Shihade, 2012). Interestingly, even when U.S. news wires provide varied coverage, the actual content used by the wire service's subscribers such as smaller local newspapers, usually take out the context included in the stories and provide a "sparse, violent, and conflict-laden portrait of the world" (Wilhoit & Weaver, 1983, p. 146). The limits extend beyond scholars and journalists from the "West," but

also exists in “internalized Orientalism” that circulates even among news media and elites in the Global South (Alahmed, 2020). This “internalized Orientalism” continues to reproduce knowledge according to existing Western frameworks and discourses in postcolonial contexts.

The concept of Orientalism has extended beyond “the Middle East” and has been applied to the production of knowledge about and representations of East Asia. The “slippage” of the term means that Orientalism “often serves as a shorthand for negative Western stereotypes about all Asians, across time and across a capacious area that stretches from Turkey to Hawaii” (Ngai, 2000). In John Dower’s (1993) historical account of World War II, he dates the historical origins of the racialized imagery used to depict the Japanese back to Aristotle and traces the origins of the racial stereotypes used in World War II to the same ones that “Europeans and Americans had applied to nonwhites for centuries” (p. 10). In particular, he connects the images of the Japanese that dominated World War II to the Yellow Peril stereotype, the notion that hordes of “yellow” or Asian people were threatening to the “Western” world. A point he returns to repeatedly is the idea that Japan was portrayed as *not* human, whether that imagery was positive or negative – “of apes, lesser men, primitives, children, madmen, and beings who possessed special powers” (p. 10).

Cumings (2013) suggests that similar types of racialized images persisted during the Korean War, arguing that “The Forgotten War” was partly erased from memory because of “the longstanding segregation and rank stereotyping of people of color throughout the [United States], which predisposed white Americans toward racism and orientalism in Korea and helped to make it such a dirty war” (p. 39). Tracing American Orientalism back to Commodore Matthew Perry’s mission to “open Japan” in the late 1800s and to the Immigration Act of 1924, which was implemented to ban Asian immigrants to the U.S., Cumings (2013) argues that scholars,

journalists, and the political elite perpetuated the notion that Koreans were “people of color.” In war correspondent Reginald Thompson’s account of the Korean War, he suggests that “war correspondents found the campaign in the South in the summer of 1950 ‘strangely disturbing,’ different from World War II in its guerrilla and popular aspect” and that “[e]ven among correspondents, ‘every man’s dearest wish was to kill a Korean’” (Thompson as cited in Cumings, 2013). Cumings argues that this Othering of the Korean people, which rendered Korean citizens barbaric and primitive, made it acceptable for “a series of American slaughters of civilians in Korea,” such as the *Nogun-ri* massacre in July 1950 (Cumings, 2013, p. 47). In addition, the framing of the Korean War “as a valiant effort against vicious Asian communism” uses a Cold War ideology to juxtapose heroic American soldiers with North Korean soldiers who “were often portrayed as brutal enemies,” so inhumane they would even kill their own (Choi, 2015, p. 273). Gauthier (2015) argues that the modern-day understanding of North Korea is a legacy of the Korean War, with the imagery of the “Oriental Communist” as a violent foe whose “leaders acted aggressively because they were incapable of what U.S. citizens considered logical decision-making” (p. 367).

Mae Ngai (2000) critiques Said’s assertion that Orientalism relies on geographic distance, pointing to the way nineteenth century Chinese immigration to the U.S. and the racialization of Asian immigrants “complicates the meaning of Orientalism by reframing the question of distance and the location of the subject” (p. 409). Ngai (2000) argues that American Orientalism is not contingent on geographical distance, but relates to the domestic production of race, including slavery, segregation, and U.S. colonialism in Asia and the Pacific. By connecting the reproduction of racial categories and inequalities in the domestic context and its role in how the U.S. relates to other countries, Ngai suggests that American Orientalism “is constitutive of

American national identity and racial power" (p. 408).

American Orientalism is also the crux of Kraus' (2015) critique of U.S. policy toward North and South Korea during the Korean War, in the post-war period, and even today. Kraus (2015) argues that in the postcolonial era, representations of foreign-occupied countries reified the power differential between the colonizer and the colonized. He argues that despite the U.S. and South Korea's allyship, a specific post-Korean War American Orientalism exists and pervades the discursive practices that English-language scholars use to construct the Koreas in their work. Focusing on the rhetorical and discursive representations of North and South Korea, Kraus (2015) suggests negative scholarly discourse about the Korean Peninsula creates an image of both the North and the South as "pawns, not agents, of history" (p. 151).

However, American Orientalism is not just the domain of scholars, but extends to media theory and normative ideas of how media should and does function in a society (McQuail, 2000). The historical trend of racializing and stereotyping the Asian "enemy" is often perpetuated not just by social scientists or "Asia experts," but also journalists (Cumings, 2013; Dower, 1993; Kraus, 2015). Alahmed (2020) argues that in postcolonial societies, the internalization of Orientalist knowledge production in both local and international news media contributes to the reification of the power structure that is in place. For example, Dower (1993) points out that during World War II, not all Germans were thought to be evil, with a clear delineation between Nazis and Germans, whereas the Allied forces in Japan were simply "Japanese" (p. 33). Later on, he provides examples of this occurring in news media, such as *Time* magazine calling the Japanese "the Jap" instead of "Japs" or journalist Ernie Pyle providing eyewitness accounts of interacting with Japanese people, talking about how they gave him "the creeps" and that he needed to take a "mental bath" after he saw them (Dower, 1993, p. 78).

For journalists during the Korean War, the familiar constraints of deadlines and competition played into their coverage. Casey (2008) described how U.S. officials' decision not to provide daily briefings contributed to an "environment of uncertainty and anxiety" that pervaded Korean War correspondents' work (p. 153). Scaling back the amount of information available to journalists "exacerbated the frantic rush to get a scoop" and led to "uncertain journalists [who] would twist their sources' arms in an effort to beat their rivals to the main story, while those who were left behind might [be] tempted to "overwrite" — that is, exaggerate — their dispatches to compensate" (p. 153). During the Korean War, journalists were competing on two fronts: they not only needed to be faster than other media outlets, but they also needed a compelling story that would appeal to audiences. As Casey (2008) points out, when journalists were unable to get the fastest story, they would resort to emphasizing the sensationalistic aspects of their stories instead. This led to U.S. officials and journalists shifting blame to the other party, with both sides accusing one another of alarmism and exaggerations about the conditions on-the-ground (Casey, 2008, p. 154).

Gauthier (2015) suggests "the simmering legacy of the Korean War continued to define an ever-evolving American construct of "North Korea" in the 1960s and beyond" (p. 367). Gauthier traces the use of "well-worn paradigms for explaining North Korea's decision-making" into the 1960s, as the U.S. media and their government sources continued to provide narratives that suggested North Korea was merely a puppet of Moscow, Beijing, and "international communism" (p. 367). Even when U.S. news media did finally acknowledge North Korea's independence, they "began to substitute irrationality for sycophancy when trying to explain North Korean motivations" (Gauthier, 2015, p. 367). Gauthier provides an example of a 1969 news wire report that referred to North Korea as "the most unpredictable, isolated, heavy handed,

and suspicious regime – Communist or non-Communist – in the world" and called North Korea "so anti-American that it makes any other 'enemy' – even North Vietnam – look at least somewhat rational" (Shackford as cited in Gauthier, 2015, p. 367). Gauthier (2015) argues that the legacy of these kinds of understandings of North Korea still exist today. This dissertation hopes to build on the historical representations of the Korean War and North Korea, and the conditions that contributed to their use, to better understand how they relate to present-day representations of North Korea.

1.1 21st Century Media Representations of North Korea

Experts on North Korea, including scholars from a variety of disciplines and ex-government officials from across the political spectrum, have critiqued present-day Anglo-Western media coverage of North Korea. Many academic and policy experts, as well as self-reflexive journalists, have tried to bring attention to the problems with recent media coverage of the country. Cumings (2013) suggests that "the incessant stereotyping and demonizing of [the North Korean] regime in the U.S., which continues undaunted today" is disturbing. He cites the example of a 1994 *Newsweek* cover story about Kim Il-Sung's passing, titled "The Headless Beast" (p. 62). Cha (2012) points to an *Economist*'s cover titled, "Greetings Earthlings," featuring an image of Kim Jong-Il as an example of the "misconceptions" and "caricatures" of North Korea that pervade Anglo-Western news media (p. 16). Since these kinds of examples are ubiquitous in both tabloid-style publications and more respected, "serious" publications, experts often differentiate their own narratives of North Korea as "free from hyperbole" (Cha & Kang, 2003, p. 9) and offer to provide an understanding of the regime, particularly the current North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, that "shows him as a real person, multi-dimensional" (Pak, 2020).

Critiques of international news media's representations of North Korea usually center

around the stereotypical nature of the coverage, particularly the "demonizing" of the North Korean regime (Cumings, 2013). Another critique is that news media coverage of North Korea uses "misleading intellectual constructs" such as the narrative of North Korea as a rogue state or the North Korean leader as a madman (Pinkston & Saunders, 2003). Scholars of North Korea also suggest that the nation is interpreted through "ideological blinders" (Pinkston & Saunders, 2003), such as calling the country "Stalinist," which Armstrong (2011) explains is a common assumption among journalists (p. 360). They also point to the problem of "unexamined assumptions," such as the erasure of Pyongyang as "the strongest and most formidable of the two Koreas in the 1950s" (Cumings, 2013, p. 40) and even into the 1970s. These problematic ways of knowing and interpreting North Korea often underpin news narratives, with "[t]ales of North Korean lunacy … never far from the front pages" (Lankov, 2017).

Another common critique leveled at present-day news coverage of North Korea is the dearth of factual information about the country, which Abrahamian (2020) says stems from a high demand for information from audiences while "information from on the ground is always low." Since the two Koreas are still at war, Abrahamian (2016) suggests that the "conflict-based relationship of the two Koreas underpins all rumors about the North." The lack of outflowing information often leads to "little snippets of information … imaginatively threaded together by creative diplomats or intelligence officials" (Madden, 2012), who perpetuate rumors and gossip about North Korea. Even journalists themselves express the view that "[r]eporting on North Korea, the world's most opaque nation, is by definition conjecture" and that even after months of researching a purported crystal meth epidemic in North Korea, "I have to admit that I have no idea what is actually happening inside North Korea" (Fish, 2011).

In addition, North Korea-related media coverage is often sensationalistic (O'Carroll,

2014). One journalist even suggested that when it comes to reporting on North Korea, "sensationalism beats truth" (Broinowski, 2015). Headlines such as *Daily Mail*'s "The North Korea that Kim doesn't want you to see: Sweeping dirt under the watch of soldiers, fearful waitresses and unlit streets among fascinating illegal images of rogue state" scream out at news audiences (Huniewicz et al., 2016). Often, British tabloid media is singled out for its problematic coverage (Hoare, 2016), such as stories claiming to contain images taken by a photographer that has been "banned from the rogue state for life" (Styles, 2014). Headlines, such as TMZ's brazen proclamation that "KIM JONG-UN REPORTEDLY DEAD," are accompanied by a lede suggesting that the North Korean leader is "on his death bed with no hope for recuperation" ("N. Korea dictator," 2020).

Foster-Carter (2020) points to capitalism as a driver for the mainstream media "churning out trashy day-go memes as clickbait, ad nauseum/infinitum." Chad O'Carroll of NK News (2014) conjectures that the confluence of decreased demand for legacy media, less resources for foreign news bureaus and specialist journalists, and new media that relies on advertising "clicks" for revenue mean that "the incentive for journalists to pursue "viral friendly" stories is increasing, even among what would traditionally have been viewed as reputable media outlets." As these analyses of North Korea media coverage suggest, financial constraints and a focus on audience clicks, coupled with public interest in North Korea, culminate in a combustible combination. As the aforementioned Pew Research Center polls indicate, interest in North Korea is high among U.S. audiences. In order to meet the public's appetite for North Korea-related news, journalists work around the constraints they face by recycling content and common tropes from story-to-story.

The problem with this sensationalistic, stereotypical, and rumor-based reporting is that

news stories about North Korea are part of the larger political universe. Groeling & Baum (2009) argue that scholars who assume a passive media when it comes to international affairs are "likely to paint an inaccurate picture of the relationship between political debates surrounding American foreign policy and subsequent public reactions to the nation's foreign policy initiatives" (p. 464). Their findings suggest that news media, such as the evening news, provide "heavily edited" versions of foreign policy. Only Sunday morning talk shows engage in traditional indexing, where the news media's coverage of foreign policy passively reflects elite rhetoric (Groeling & Baum, 2009, p. 463). In other words, journalists play a "strategic intervening role" in world affairs and wield the power to shape conversations about U.S. foreign policy beyond simply reporting verbatim what political elites say. As Gusterson (2008) points out, "deeply flawed" reporting "skews policy debates and confuses public perceptions" of North Korea (p. 21). To better understand the North Korea media coverage conundrum, this next section examines the existing overarching narratives about North Korea.

2. Dominant Narratives about North Korea

Scholars have primarily asked important questions about the coverage of North Korea through content analyses, which have yielded rich and valuable insight into the narratives of North Korea that exist in the general public's imagination. Negative media images of North Korea continue to persist (Choi, 2010), with frames used to reinforce "a negative, adversarial orientation towards North Korea" (Dalton et al., 2016, p. 523). Framing North Korea as a threat serves to "delegitimise, marginalise and demonise" by painting North Korea as dangerous, full of malintent, and ready for conflict (Dalton et al., 2016, p. 523). Comparative studies of media frames suggest that press nationalism or using national interest to frame coverage of North Korea, is common (Jang, 2013; Lim, 2013). Differences in framing exist when comparing South

Korean and Western media, as well as multi-country framing analysis of the countries involved in the Six-Party Talks (Chung, Lessman, & Fan, 2014; Jang et al., 2015; Yoon & Wilson, 2016). From my review of literature on news framing and North Korea, two salient frames emerged – the threat frame and the exoticization frame.

The threat frame privileges the idea that North Korea is a security risk to other countries. According to Smith (2014), North Korea constructed as a threat because of the "often unconsciously adopted paradigmatic lens in which knowledge about North Korea is subordinated and filtered through the prism of classic concerns about national security" (p. 128). Smith (2000) argues that viewing North Korea only as a security threat "does not tell the whole story about north Korea; and worse, it distorts the complexities of north Korean politics and policies" (p. 611). Emphasizing North Korea as a security threat often means that when foreign policy makers encounter data that does not fit into this frame, the data "are distorted to meet the requirements of the perspective – in other words, they are *securitized*" (p. 611). Securitizing what we know about North Korea obscures relevant issues, such as human rights (Smith, 2014).

Several content analyses of North Korea-related news coverage found that Anglophone news media used frames portraying North Korea as a security threat. Framing North Korea as a threat serves to create "a simplified – and therefore easily decipherable – narrative: one that evokes a form of nostalgia for the "strange" yet "familiar" enemy in the form of state socialism and Cold War divisions" (West, 2017, p. 614). Lim and Seo (2009) found that a "military-threat frame," or portrayals of North Korea "as a terrorism-sponsoring country that pursued or exported missile technology and weapons of mass destruction" were present in *The New York Times* and U.S. government policy statements (p. 212). Dalton et al.'s (2016) analysis of Australian news media coverage of North Korea found the country "frequently presented as a military threat that

poses a direct and serious regional and international security concern" (p. 534). Robertson (2019) found that the national security frame used in English-language discourse about North Korea is at times incompatible with South Korean discourse about North Korea, which extends to a broader range of issues, including reunification, the economy, and societal concerns.

In Shaw and Jenkins' (2019) analysis of the controversy surrounding the film *The Interview*, they argue that leaked Sony emails show how "Western filmic depictions of North Korean villainy" are part of the interplay between the U.S. government and Hollywood (p. 25). Following George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union that labeled North Korea as part of the "axis of evil," studies found that North Korea was framed as "evil" and an "enemy" (Choi, 2010) and that news coverage "continues to project the country as a threat to the international community and to world peace" (Kim, K. H., 2014, p. 240). Kim's (2014) critical discourse analysis found that "the 'threat theme' still dominates news reporting on the country in general and the latest missile launch in particular" (p. 240). Comparative media studies also found that the threat frame persists in North Korea-related media coverage, with China, South Korea, and the U.S. all using a common threat frame to contextualize North Korean nuclear capabilities and paint North Korea as "an unforgivable villain against the whole world, who therefore should be sanctioned and punished" (Dai & Hyun, 2010, p. 309). A network analysis of U.S., British, French, and German news found that North Korea is often presented "as the provocateur" (Boudana & Segev, 2017, p. 314), but without any contextual explanation as to why.

Similar to framing North Korea as a threat, the exoticization frame paints North Korea as an incomprehensible, irrational state with a madman leader. Dalton et al. (2016) find that Australian media use language that "is often dehumanizing and reductive, metaphorically associating North Korea and its leadership's actions with abnormal, irrational human

behaviours" (p. 543). Smith (2014) suggests that international media "love a story about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea) that fits into the genre of mad, bad, and weird" (p. 127). Byman and Lind (2010) assert that "the media persist in portraying North Korea's leader as a madman or an incompetent playboy," despite scholarly arguments about the coherence of North Korea's foreign policy (p. 73). A study of Japanese print media discourse on North Korea finds that "North Korea is associated with discursive practices evoking irrationality, unpredictability and danger" (Kožíšek, 2016, p. 8).

The exoticization frame contrasts starkly with many scholars who assert that "North Korea's image as an irrational regime is largely a product of misunderstanding and propaganda, but it has become an unquestioned assumption among Pyongyang's adversaries" (Roy, 1994). In fact, scholars who study North Korea often point to the rationality of the North Korean regime (e.g., Cha & Kang, 2003; Pinkston & Saunders, 2003). Based on an analysis of North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) English-language news, Rich (2012) suggests that the KCNA is not just propaganda but serves to promote the legitimacy of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il. The contradictions between news media portrayals of North Korea and scholarly assertions that North Korea is a rational actor point to a disconnect between expert opinion and news narratives. This next section discusses journalists as a key actor in framing North Korea and creating news narratives about the country.

2.1 Journalists' Narratives

Journalists play an integral role in creating narratives about the events and places they cover, because they act as sense-makers whose "work is grounded in vaguely defined notions of professional expertise and judgment" (Coddington, 2014). Donsbach (2004) argues that public perceptions are often guided by "journalists' perceptions and group-dynamic processes within

the profession" (p. 151). He suggests that not only do journalists rely on their own predispositions, they also use social interactions with their competitor-colleagues, editors, and sources to validate their judgments. This is particularly important since "journalists, unlike most other professions, constantly have to make perceptional decisions (truth, relevance, acceptability of facts and issues)" (Donsbach, 2004, p. 151). As journalists gather information about North Korea, they engage in gatekeeping, or the selection and/or omission of certain information. With international journalism, Seib (2007) suggests that journalists have "an obligation to educate rather than merely inform" (p. 163), which imbues their narrative choices with even more meaning. Through Holiday et al.'s (2019) analysis of the choices various news outlets made in deciding which of David Guttenfelder's Instagram photographs of North Korea to include in their own coverage, they concluded that each news outlet's choices "exemplified unique narratives and visual frames with potential to affect readers' perspectives of what it looks like in North Korea" (p. 243). According to Ishimaru Jiro, the editor and publisher of the newsmagazine *Rimjin-gang*, which relies on North Korean citizen journalists for videos, photographs, and interviews, raw data that comes out of North Korea requires interpretation (Chiu, 2010).

Critiques of existing interpretations of North Korea, such as Gusterson's (2008) claim that "mainstream American print media coverage of North Korea's nuclear weapons program has been deeply flawed, a reality that skews policy debates and confuses public perceptions" (p. 21), illustrate the problematics of the sense-making function of journalism for diplomacy and policy. Cumings (1998) critiques the ahistoricity of media coverage of North Korea, arguing "that only a historically-informed analysis can make sense of the relationship between North Korea and the U.S." (p. 213). Winfield & Yoon (2002) find that cartoons depicting North Korea relied only on the current event pictured, without providing historical references to contextualize the event.

Journalists covering North Korea must interpret the information they gather, provide historical context, and form news narratives that make sense for their audience. This requires a great deal of labor and means paying careful attention to ensure that their news judgment does not merely reflect their predisposition to certain narratives. For example, studies have shown that journalists' attitudes toward North Korea are influenced by their own political orientation and their home country's foreign policy orientation (Lee, 2009a; Seo, 2009).

Journalists' varying roles as generalist foreign correspondents, national security and international affairs reporters in their home country, journalists that parachute in for newsworthy events, and journalistic laborers including fixers, stringers, and translators, can also factor into the way journalists create narratives about North Korea. Lee (2009b) found that "correspondents with longer experiences and better knowledge of local culture or language were found to have more control in their news frames" (p. 147). This raises questions about how a journalist's background (or lack thereof) covering or studying the Korean peninsula influences news narratives about North Korea, particularly since experts on the DPRK often cite longevity of study of North Korea as a way to develop the ability to instinctually analyze the regime's behavior (Cho, 2020).

In addition, the social nature of newsmaking means news narratives are co-constructed by multiple social actors inside and outside of the institutionalized boundaries of journalism, such as journalists themselves, their editors, and their sources. Domingo and Le Cam (2015) suggest that "social actors seek through journalists the validation of their discourses to reach the widest public possible" (p. 150), which means journalists must consider what role their social relationships and roles are playing in the multi-actor discourse about North Korea. How journalists choose to narrate North Korea is not separate from their predispositions toward North

Korea, and how their prior understandings influence the kind of information they gather, who they rely on for information, and how they interpret information about North Korea. This next section examines the information context in which journalists work to create news narratives about North Korea.

3. North Korea's Information Context

The idea that North Korea is inaccessible, and that "[n]o one outside the ruling inner circle knows for sure" what happens inside the country (Fenton, 2010), is common. It is a taken-for-granted notion that "North Korea appears to be a *sui genesis* black hole; something which defies closer scrutiny because it is shrouded in secrecy and secluded from the rest of the world" (Shim, 2013). The problem is not unique to journalists, but also plagues U.S. intelligence-gathering agencies, who are thought to have "'no ability' to build sources in North Korea and very limited opportunities to gather intelligence in North Korea" (Vavra, 2018). These challenges to accessing information from inside of North Korea have led to a reliance on "second-hand information from countries that have diplomatic relations or direct contacts with North Korea" (Pinkston & Saunders, 2003, p. 80), as well as NGO workers and tour agencies with access to the country (Rich, 2014). According to Pinkston & Saunders (2003), second-hand accounts often have "a narrow focus and necessarily provide an incomplete and distorted picture of what is actually happening in North Korea," making it difficult to create effective policies toward North Korea (p. 80).

Despite the barriers to the flow of information into and out of North Korea, there are indications that North Korea's media environment is changing (Baek, 2016; Kretchun & Kim, 2012). There is more access to foreign media within the DPRK (Kuhnhenn, Lee & Zhang, 2020), and research suggests there is a relationship between exposure to media from outside of the

country and positive perceptions of the outside world (Kretchun & Kim, 2012). In particular, South Korean cultural exports wield soft power over North Koreans (Lerner, 2015), which some scholars argue signifies social change (Yoon, 2015) and can even motivate North Koreans to defect (Chung, 2019). Scholars have argued that the flow of information coming out of North Korea has also increased and "access to, and knowledge about, North Korea and its citizens have been greater than ever before, as both continue to expand" (Kang, 2011, p. 145). However, there are mixed conclusions on how that affects North Korea scholarship and journalism (Armstrong, 2011; Rich, 2014). Armstrong (2011) argues that the increased flow of information means more "informed scholarship" and "insightful journalism and reliable first-hand accounts" (p. 368), while Rich (2014) suggests that even with more information, "firsthand knowledge by scholars has not made similar gains" and that "[s]peculation in the absence of empirical data unfortunately dominates much of the research" on North Korea (p. 128). If "North Korea's internal dynamics are not the black box that much of the Western media seems to suggest" (Rich, 2014, p. 135), then these conflicting assertions about the lack of information point to the need for examining the information environment to understand the critiques of media coverage related to North Korea.

According to Byman and Lind (2010), the lack of information coming from North Korea is part of the Kim regime's authoritarian toolbox, which includes the "manipulation of ideas and information" to sustain the regime. North Korea is a "closed society" that is relatively isolated from the international community, and its citizens lack open access to outside information and are subjected to controlled travel within and outside of the country. In addition, the Korean peninsula is still technically at war. Abrahamian (2016) points to this ongoing war as a reason for the lack of information and the skewed views of South Korean press. The information context is

extremely limited when it comes to the inner workings of the North Korean regime. Even though journalists can observe changes in North Korea over time or talk to diplomats, NGO workers, and citizen journalists inside of North Korea, information about the specific details of how governance works is scarce. In late April 2020, the speculation over Kim Jong-Un's disappearance for events such as the April 15 anniversary of his grandfather Kim Il-Sung's birthday, gave way to several weeks of speculation about his health and whether he had passed away. U.S. government officials claimed Kim Jong-Un could be in "grave danger after undergoing a previous surgery" (Sciutto et al., 2020), the South Korean Unification Minister was able to "say confidently that there is nothing unusual" about Kim Jong-Un's health (Choe, 2020a), and Reuters' "scoop" claimed that China had sent a team of doctors and government officials "to advise on North Korean leader Kim Jong Un" (Reuters Staff, 2020). The lack of information about the North Korean leadership and what was going on inside North Korea led to rumors that "fill[ed] the gap" (Alfred, 2014). As Broinowski (2015) put it, North Korea has "fueled a rumor industry worth billions of clicks."

The contradictory and speculative nature of evidence about North Korea means that journalists must try to determine what information is credible and what qualifies as misinformation. If we adopt Vraga and Bode's (2020) definition of misinformation as "information considered incorrect based on the best available evidence from relevant experts at the time," (p. 138), then journalists face yet another obstacle. North Korea experts often disagree with one another on how to interpret the North Korean regime's behavior or events such as Kim Jong-Un's "disappearance" from North Korean state media for a couple of weeks. In addition to speculation or rumors about North Korea, journalists must also contend with disinformation or non-truths spread by anonymous government officials, and propaganda, which are one-sided and

generated by government officials to rally public support, are also part of the North Korea-related information environment.

When speculation about Kim Jong-Un's health began, Choe Sang-Hun (2020b), the Seoul bureau chief for *The New York Times*, provided an overview of the health rumors surrounding the Kim dynasty, highlighting the fact that there are multiple examples of North Korean officials rumored to have disappeared or been executed, only to turn up alive. Choe cited a 1986 South Korean newspaper "scoop" saying that Kim Il-Sung was killed, only to reappear two days later. He provided more recent examples of rumors that turned out to be false, including speculation in 2014 that Kim Jong-Un's month-long disappearance from North Korean state media signaled a coup; it turned out Kim was recovering from ankle surgery. Another recent example was the 2015 rumor that Kim Jong-Un ordered the execution of his aunt, Kim Kyong-Hui, only for pictures of her – alive and well – to surface January 2020. But Choe also pointed out that in 2008, rumors that Kim Jong-Il suffered a stroke turned out to be true.

According to Tunstall (1971), "[r]umours tend to occur when there is an imbalance between an urgent demand for information and a failure in the supply" (p. 17). The conditions under which rumors generate and spread include uncertainty, anxiety, outcome-relevant involvement, and credulity (Rosnow, 1991); in other words, rumors develop when people feel uncertain and anxious about something of interest to them that also seems plausible. Journalists must operate in an information context where they are faced with interpreting speculation and rumors about North Korea, alongside disinformation and/or propaganda from various state actors that have a stake in public perceptions of North Korea. Additionally, journalists must do much of their labor from outside of North Korea. This next section examines how North Korea's information context influences journalist's ability to eyewitness in North Korea.

3.1 Eyewitnessing in North Korea

The lengthy process associated with entering the country and the restrictions on movement within the country contribute to the question of whether journalists who have visited North Korea have more insight into the country than those reporting from outside of the DPRK. Journalists' visits to North Korea involve various logistical hurdles. Obtaining a journalist visa can be challenging, with some opting to enter North Korea on tourist visas instead (Anderson, 2003; Demick, 2012). According to NPR's *All Things Considered* host Mary Louise Kelly, the lengthy process of getting a journalist visa involved meeting with the North Korean ambassador to the U.N., months of emails and phone calls, and applying for a second passport with the U.S. State Department by claiming that the visit would benefit U.S. national security (Kelly, 2018b). Even booking a flight to North Korea is more difficult than making a quick purchase on an airline website; Kelly described the experience of trying to book a flight on North Korean airline Air Koryo and having to go through a Beijing-based travel agency to book tickets since Air Koryo does not take credit cards or wire transfers from U.S. banks (Kelly, 2018b). Tours to North Korea can also cost visitors "luxury travel prices," which critics argue are used to support the North Korean regime (Lee, 2015).

The act of engaging in journalism from inside North Korea presents with it a series of contingent circumstances – being allowed to enter the country, but constantly being under the surveillance and/or guidance of North Korean minders and the limitations on what kinds of stories that can be told. Carlin (2016) points to the potential clash between Anglo-Western reporters and their North Korean guides, who can develop an adversarial relationship if reporters try to engage in "gotcha" journalism. This sometimes leads to the detention and expulsion of journalists. Take, for example, the hours-long detention and expulsion of BBC correspondent Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, producer Maria Byrne, and cameraman Matthew Goddard in 2016

("BBC's Rupert Wingfield-Hayes and team expelled," 2016). North Korean officials claimed Wingfield-Hayes' coverage "distorted facts and realities" (Pearson, 2016) by referring to Kim Jong Un as "corpulent and unpredictable" and referring to North Korea as "comical" and "scary" (Fifield, 2016; Taylor, 2016).

Once inside North Korea, there are limited opportunities to travel within the country and a North Korean minder constantly accompanies visitors. North Korean minders often act as "an interpreter, a fixer, a bridge between our worlds" (Kelly, 2018a). According to Seo (2019), these North Korean minders/guides/stringers take on various kinds of labor, depending on their individual orientations toward surveillance versus their commitment to quality journalism. These labor roles range from the "minder" whose job is to surveil and control the journalist, to the "guide" who acts as both a translator and a negotiator of strict itineraries, to the "stringer" assigned to work alongside the Western news agencies with bureaus in Pyongyang (Seo, 2019).

Although the Chinese state-run news agency Xinhua and Russia's TASS have had bureaus in Pyongyang "dating back to the days when the Soviet Union and China were "fraternal allies"" (Chinoy, 2011), Anglo-Western news outlets have had a shorter history in North Korea. In 2006, the Associated Press (AP) set-up a full-time office for AP Television News ("AP Opens News Bureau," 2006). Subsequently, the AP expanded their presence in 2012 with then-Koreas Bureau Chief Jean H. Lee and Chief Asia Photographer David Guttenfelder at the helm (Daniszewski, 2012). In 2016, Agence France-Presse (AFP) set up a bureau in Pyongyang, training a Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) photographer and videographer to work alongside their AFP staff (Leridon, 2016). Even with the opening of Anglophone wire service bureaus in Pyongyang, trips to North Korea remain relatively short. Journalists working at Western news organizations' bureaus in Pyongyang can only live there on a "semi-permanent"

basis over about 10 days per month (Farhi, 2015).

Although Sigal (1998) suggested the lack of news coverage on the nuclear negotiations in the early 1990s was related to the fact that no Western news organization had a bureau in Pyongyang, there have been many critiques of journalism from these established bureaus. Thayer (2014), a former AP stringer, penned a criticism of the AP's Pyongyang bureau as a "Potemkin news bureau" that operates under the conditions set by an agreement between the AP and KCNA, using staff "hand-picked" by the North Koreans. In her comparison of AP and NK News' coverage of North Korea, Seo (2018) argues that "[t]he Pyongyang bureau of the AP, despite its prestige, is essentially a one-man operation that barely scratches the surface of the country it is charged with covering" (p. 1374). Finding that AP coverage contains softer news and that NK News, a news outlet focused on North Korea, provides more diversity in perspectives, Seo (2018) contends that "access did not enhance the depth and breadth of reporting, but compromised it" (p. 1375). North Korea experts often consider on-the-ground coverage from North Korea "lightweight" (DeHart, 2013). Kester (2010) cites former Dutch correspondent Joris Luyendijk's book about working in authoritarian countries and his conclusion that "practicing journalism (according to western standards) under (semi-)dictatorial circumstances is an impossible task — something that is generally denied, ignored or not acknowledged enough by most correspondents" (p. 55).

However, not all journalists have the same experience with eyewitnessing. Language abilities may affect what journalists observe while inside North Korea. Journalists who do not have Korean language skills may miss reading signage or listening in on conversations in Korean that tell a different story than the one their government minders/helpers tell them (Cha, 2012, p. 9). Or consider former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee's experience as an "ethnic Korean" that

learned "how to blend in," which meant that during her time in North Korea, people would approach her and try to sell her homemade goods ("What Daily Life in North Korea," 2018). Lee (2018) argues that her appearance and ability to assimilate culturally played a role in her ability to eyewitness.

Journalists adapt to the challenges of eyewitnessing through a shift in focus from the North Korean regime to the North Korean people, or what Kester (2010) calls the "'phenomenological' method" of writing about peoples' everyday experiences and observations. This method uses a human-interest angle when reporting in authoritarian contexts where there are challenges to information gathering and provides news audiences with insight into living conditions in the country. As journalists adapt to North Korea's information context, the knowledge they construct is "both the output of structural constraints and a structure itself in the way agents interpret and construct reality" (Archetti, 2010, p. 572). Even as journalists are working around the structural constraints of eyewitnessing in North Korea, the knowledge they produce is a specific interpretation of the reality inside the nation. In fact, journalists that travel to North Korea often write a first-person account of their experience eyewitnessing in North Korea, noting "that they are working in conditions unlike those they have faced anywhere else in the world" (Carlin, 2016). The experience of an Anglo-Western journalist trying to practice journalism that adheres to Western standards becomes the framework through which news audiences get to know North Korea. In addition, any information about North Korea becomes an unprecedented look inside the country. Marguerite Higgins, the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting, won the award for her reporting on the Korean War in 1951. Her cover of her book, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent*, features the tagline: "She risked red gunfire, bucked red tape — to bring you the true inside story."

Countless news reports and articles about North Korea make similar claims about being given unprecedented access or getting an insider view on the country, even if the content does not provide new information.

Journalists who have traveled to North Korea multiple times also tout the number of times they have visited as a point of pride. For example, CNN correspondent Will Ripley's current official bio and Twitter profile (back when it was retrieved in June 2020) both featured the fact that he has traveled to North Korea 19 times (Ripley, (n.d.), "Will Ripley," (n.d.)). Ripley asserts that his role as an eyewitness gives him authority to report on North Korea. As Zelizer (2007) suggests, eyewitnessing provides the journalist with "credibility and authenticity, particularly when audiences have no first-hand knowledge of what is being reported" (p. 411). The constrained reporting environment, with limited opportunities for eyewitnessing inside North Korea, makes journalists' reliance on secondhand sources even more pronounced. This next section examines how journalists gather information about North Korea from outside of the country.

4. Gathering Information about North Korea

Information gathering practices that rely on available sources, such as North Korean state media, is one of the ways journalists work around the restrictions associated with going to North Korea. Kim (2010) argues that "[t]he real challenge in researching North Korea emerges not from the dearth of available materials, but from the overabundance of primary sources begging for researchers' attention" (p. 319). Journalists use open-source intelligence (OSINT), such as reading North Korean state media, analyzing propaganda, and engaging with satellite imagery, to understand North Korea. In the absence of comment from North Korean officials, the availability of English-language versions of North Korean state media mean journalists can use reports from

KCNA, the *Rodong Sinmun*, or Korean Central Television (KCTV) as a stand-in for official commentary from the North Korean government.

Similar to the use of Kremlinology to understand the Soviet Union's leadership structure, reading between the lines of *Rodong Sinmun* or KCNA media reports becomes a way to understand the inner workings of the Kim regime. This is especially important, given North Korea's use of state media as "more than a mere instrument of propaganda" and as an "important tool for communication with the outside world" (Urbansky & Trecker, 2018, p. 308). In fact, Altenberger (2014) argues that the KCNA uses internet platforms and social media "as tools of statecraft and foreign policy" (p. 633), providing journalists with multiple opportunities for interpretation. Rich (2014) contends that "North Korea's daily English language news reports, while commonly dismissed as purely propaganda, provides potential insights" into leadership successions in the Kim family (p. 127). Cumings (1998) argues that reading North Korean state media provide more information about what is going on between the U.S. and North Korea than reading U.S. publications (p. 208). For example, understanding North Korea's goal of normalization with the U.S. and the rationale behind enhancing their nuclear capabilities (Han, 2009), or being able to make the connection between bellicose images on KCTV and worsening inter-Korean relations (Kim, 2017) provides journalists with an opportunity to include the North Korean perspective in their accounts.

As Altenberger (2014) suggests, "it would be false to assume that the North Korean regime does not interact with the outside world" (p. 631). North Korea uses its state media for public relations purposes, such as their successful 1970s campaign to increase the frequency and quality of coverage about North Korea (Chae, 2020, p.1370) and their strategy during the 2012 Olympics to encourage alternative discourse about North Korea in foreign media (Merkel, 2013).

More recently Kim Jong-Un has engaged in a "charm offensive" by using selfies and conciliatory gestures to present himself as an entertainer and to legitimize his leadership, particularly in U.S. media outlets (Sonnevend, 2019; Sonnevend & Kim, 2020). Green (2012) argues that North Korean state media is not aimed merely at international audiences, but is used as a way of communicating with the DPRK's domestic audiences, because "methods of affecting public opinion outside the limited strictures of the state media are in very short supply."

In the Russian context, Kester (2010) describes the importance of remaining critical of information that come from state media. Anglophone journalists' reliance on North Korean state media calls them to learn how to read between the lines of potential disinformation or propaganda. In addition, the "fragmented architecture of North Korean news" (Green, 2012) means journalists must assess any information they gather against expert knowledge or cross-check the information with other readily available sources. Relying on photographs, videos, and satellite imagery for verification assumes that in the absence of eyewitnessing, journalists can still "see" North Korea. After Kim Jong-Un's short "disappearance" in April 2020, photographs and video footage of Kim Jong-Un's reappearance at a fertilizer factory were used as confirmation that he was still alive. Zelizer (2007) suggests that more recently, the definition of eyewitnessing has expanded so that "technology and nonconventional journalists are more central than either journalists or their reports" (p. 425). However, the danger of relying on imagery as a neutral source of information is journalists' potential to ignore how "vision is ideologically rooted" and that images are generated from a specific viewpoint (Barney, 2019, p. 7). In particular, the use of satellite images to engage in a digital mapping of North Korea "reveals the practices of the Western eye watching a shrouded culture from outside and above," concentrating on information through a militarized lens (e.g., nuclear sites) or to track human

rights violations (e.g., labor camps) (Barney, 2019).

Just as visual imagery represents a specific way of viewing North Korea, journalists' individual abilities and identities also influence the process of gathering information. Since coverage of the DPRK often occurs from outside the country, journalists may be based in a variety of locations, including Seoul, but also other locales in the Asia Pacific region, Washington, D.C., or London. Korean language abilities vary among journalists, especially "spiralist" foreign correspondents who are cycling in and out of three to five years postings in various regions of the world. Even those reporting from Seoul do not necessarily have Korean language abilities. English is ubiquitous in Seoul, with a 2014 poll showing that half of Koreans under the age of 40 can understand basic English ("The Future of English," 2014). Journalists without language skills may rely on yet another layer of mediation in gathering information, namely local translators, fixers, and stringers who contact sources, set up interviews, and arrange other information-gathering logistics. However, language and translation errors can lead to misunderstandings about North Korea (Pinkston & Saunders, 2003). In the process of translation, nuances that may be lost include "referential and connotative meanings," different meanings than what the source intended, and "the silencing of certain voices" (Kang, 2007, p. 237).

Although coverage of North Korea features datelines from a variety of places, journalists in Seoul are uniquely equipped to develop interactional expertise (Collins & Evans, 2007), or the "middle ground between practical activity and books, computers, and so forth" (p. 30). Journalists working for a "foreign" news outlet in Seoul become part of a community of "competitor-colleagues," or an informal group that exchanges routine information, cooperates with one another (except for exclusives), and participates in more formalized interactions, such as becoming members of the SFCC or AAJA. Journalists' interactions with their competitor-

colleagues can influence their information gathering behavior, as they seek "social validation of judgments" within their group and begin to develop a "shared reality" (Donsbach, 2004). For example, Donsbach (2004) argues that journalists may experience embarrassment if they decide to report on information that other news outlets have decided to ignore or when they do not report on information that everyone is has reported.

While the social process of gathering information can lead journalists to "act as a brake on each other, moderating and filtering what gets reported" about North Korea (Abrahamian, 2020), it can also lead journalists to seek out novel information about North Korea. As Tunstall (1971) suggests, the "hallmark of a really indisputable 'exclusive' is being followed up by the competition" (p. 216) and journalists are often in search of these "scoops." The search for these exclusives has worsened the criticism that South Korean news media, who has gotten the "facts" wrong, have faced in recent years. As Anglo-Western news outlets rely on local news sources to inform their coverage, journalists feel a need to become well-versed in South Korean society's ideological context. As studies have shown, although both U.S. and South Korean news outlets frame North Korea negatively most of the time (Lee, Baek & Jeong, 2020), South Korean news outlets' ideological views influenced their framing of North Korea and opinion discourse (Ha, 2015; Lee, Baek & Jeong, 2020). Given the frequency of rumors that turn out to be untrue, the valuing of "immediacy" in journalism (Deuze, 2005) and the 24/7 news cycle has been juxtaposed with the idea of slow journalism, which calls for less of a focus on competition and more time to avoid sensationalism and connect with more verifiable sources (Le Masurier, 2015).

Not only does competition among news outlets influence information gathering for journalists, but their editors often care deeply about keeping up with the competition. The level

of knowledge about North Korea among editors, which varies depending on their location and experience with covering North Korea, can play a role in the topics covered and the kinds of stories about North Korea assigned to reporters. Lee (2000) found that U.S. editors focused on topics in their North Korea coverage, such as famine, the military, isolation, totalitarianism, and communism, and that U.S. editors held more negative views on North Korea than South Korean editors did. As editors and journalists build trust with one another, the hope is that editors rely more on the reporter's intuition to decide whether a topic to cover.

Although journalists working for Anglophone news organizations in Seoul are tasked with covering both North and South Korea, Curran & Gibson (2020) find that "the majority of American news articles about the Korean Peninsula are devoted to North Korea" (p. 14). By virtue of their location, the bulk of Anglophone news coverage pertaining to the Koreas is about North Korea, and several journalists I spoke with confirmed that over half of their reporting from Seoul was about the DPRK. Despite producing more content about North Korea, journalists' dual set of responsibilities may leave less time for them to devote to gathering information about North Korea. As journalists gather information from sources that are readily available to them, they simultaneously engage in sense-making and analysis as they choose what information to include in their reporting and what gets left out. Building sources is an important part of how journalists develop their interactional expertise about North Korea and build the necessary skills to engage in their own "Kremlinology" and analysis of North Korea (Madden as cited in Cho, 2020).

4.1 Sourcing

In Sigal's (1998) account of nuclear negotiations with North Korea in the early 1990s, he argues that "news is what *somebody says* has happened," especially when the events are not open

to the public (p. 219). One of the greatest challenges associated with covering authoritarian regimes are "the (in)accessibility and (un)reliability of sources" (Kester, 2010, p. 55). Gusterson (2008) critiques the use of anonymous sources in North Korea coverage as allowing U.S. government officials to provide "inflammatory and inaccurate allegations" about North Korea without taking responsibility for their statements (p. 37). Gusterson finds that there is a lack of diversity among sources used in U.S. media coverage of North Korea and that "the most favored opinions are those of current or former government officials and of the axe-grinders at Washington think tanks" (p. 37). This is consistent with one of the most "consistently-replicated findings of research on American journalism," which is that government officials dominate as news sources in both domestic and international news (Hallin, Manoff & Weddle, 1993).

Another consistent finding in journalism sourcing studies pertain to the nationalistic nature of international news coverage. Lee and Wang's (2016) study shows that U.S., Chinese, and South Korean news agencies all conform to their respective country's national interest and domestic politics in the way they source stories on North Korea. Seo & Lim (2010) find that journalists relied on government officials from their home country "because of their high accessibility and credibility" (p. 450). Sigal (1998) argues that U.S. government officials and the foreign policy establishment dominated coverage of North Korea and nuclear diplomacy, "many of whom had never talked to a North Korean or seen North Korea" (p. 222). Kim and Jahng's (2016) comparative study of U.S. and South Korean newspapers suggests that the reliance on U.S. government officials also extended to South Korean newspapers, who "cited US politicians more often than Korean sources in the security, diplomacy, and economy frames" (p. 139).

Sourcing is a key part of a journalist's claim to objectivity. Instead of inserting one's own opinion, journalists can quote sources' opinions that not only inform but also provide color to the

story. However, Seo (2009) found that when journalists consider a source credible, the source's perception of North Korea influences journalists to emphasize a particular – in this case, negative – perception of North Korea. Studies also suggest that sources featured in U.S. news coverage of North Korea express a limited range of opinions. Sigal (1998) points to U.S. government officials who favored engagement as "reluctant to go public," whereas their opponents were "vocal and well covered" in U.S. news (p. 208). In Mobrand & Tingbacke's (2018) study of Nordic news stories about North Korea, sources were found to regularly express demonizing viewpoints.

The privileging of official sources, especially U.S. government officials, is in stark contrast to the lack of North Korean sources in Anglophone media coverage of North Korea (Sigal, 1998; Gusterson, 2008). Since journalists cannot easily get quotes from North Korean government officials, they rely on state media to provide the official DPRK perspective, giving less weight to other sources who have firsthand experience inside the nation. These sources include diplomats from countries that have normalized relations with North Korea, NGO workers who travel in and out of the country, and defectors/refugees who have left. Out of these three "eyewitness" sources, defectors/refugees remain the most controversial. In academic studies, interviewing North Korean defectors present issues such as selection and demographic biases, unequal power relations between researchers and interviewers, the issue of monetary incentives, and language barriers (Song & Denney, 2019, p. 451). Another limitation of interviewing defectors relates to how much time has passed since they lived in North Korea, with more time away meaning their experiences are further removed from the present-day (Rich, 2014). Adding to these concerns are the critiques of North Korean defector's testimony, including discrepancies in Yeonmi Park's tale of how she escaped North Korea and the

controversy over Shin Dong-hyuk's admission that there were inaccuracies in his account of time spent at a North Korean labor camp (Cussen, 2016). However, journalists such as Barbara Demick and Anna Fifield are praised for their use of North Korean defectors accounts in their reporting. Defectors/refugees provide insight into North Korea's "everyday politics and economics," even if they do not have direct knowledge of elite politics (Rich, 2014, p. 128). Journalists navigate a fine line between questioning defector testimonies while at the same time giving weight to defector knowledge. Chapter 4 will examine in greater detail where journalists covering North Korea place defector accounts in their hierarchy of sources.

5. Conclusion

By situating media coverage of North Korea within its historical and information context, this chapter reviewed the important work that has already been done on news media coverage of North Korea. The chapter started with a review of the historical and present-day legacies of problematic representations of the Asian "Other." Next, I outlined two dominant news narratives about North Korea and discussed how journalistic labor contributes to creating these narratives. Then, I discussed background information that is crucial to understanding North Korea's information context, particularly journalists' access eyewitnessing inside North Korea. Finally, the chapter examined how journalists gather information about North Korea, paying special attention to the important role of sourcing.

Chapter 2 focuses its attention on how journalists describe North Korea and their own accounts of how they cover the country. These narratives give us insight into the picture of North Korea in journalists' heads, and their own account of which factors both shape and constrain their reporting on North Korea. Through journalists' explanations, justifications, and descriptions of the strategies they use to narrate DPRK, Chapter 2 highlights how journalists' ideas of the

country itself, their own identities, and their response to the constraints of covering North Korea inform the way they narrate North Korea.

Chapter 2: Narrating North Korea

North Korean women forced to call lovers 'male comrades' in weird propaganda culture war (Solomons, 2021). Kim Jong-un bans mullets, skinny jeans in North Korea (O'Neill, 2021). Kim Jong-un lost weight. No one knows how or why (Choe, 2021). Kim Jong Un, fearing loss of control, has grooming and parenting advice for North Korean women (Miller, 2021). These are just four of the recent North Korea-related headlines that graced the pages of tabloids such as the U.K.'s *Daily Star* and the U.S.'s *New York Post*, alongside venerated U.S. newspapers *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Although these kinds of headlines are a mainstay of tabloids and gossip rags, they are also well-represented in more "serious" news outlets' coverage of North Korea.

Scholars studying North Korea have long pointed to news coverage of the country as problematic, providing a caricatured version of reality (Armstrong, 2011; Cha, 2012; Cha & Kang, 2003; Cumings, 2013; Lankov, 2017). However, these outrageous conceptions of North Korea are not limited to news media. Elites have narrowed the political discourse about North Korea to create a "sphere of consensus" (Hallin, 1986) depicting North Korea as an enemy, a part of the "axis of evil" (Bush, 2002). The consensus on North Korea is so strong that MGM's 2012 remake of *Red Dawn*, a 1980s Cold War drama, replaces China with North Korea as the primary villain. Using the rationale that North Korea is an "isolated country where American media companies have no dollars at stake," MGM went about the process of "digitally erasing Chinese flags and military symbols from "Red Dawn," substituting dialogue and altering the film to depict much of the invading force as being from North Korea" (Fritz & Horn, 2011).

The U.S. public reflects this narrow conception of North Korea, with recent polling showing that they view North Korea more negatively than any other country in the Asia-Pacific region

(Moncus & Silver, 2021).

Journalists working at Anglophone news organizations must provide coverage of North Korea with the backdrop of this limited discourse looming large. In this chapter, I examine the narratives journalists use to describe North Korea and the narratives they use to talk about how they cover North Korea. This includes exploring how journalists feel about Anglo-Western journalism's representations of North Korea and which representations they privilege in our conversations. I also examine how journalists talk about the complexities of ethnic and national identity in relation to journalism practice and North Korea. This chapter will address the following question:

> **RQ$_1$:** Which narratives about North Korea do journalists privilege the most, and in what ways do journalists foreground identity in these narratives? How do journalists justify the use of these narratives?

The first half of Chapter 2 discusses the ideological context in which journalists describe North Korea. By observing how journalists talk about North Korea and why it is newsworthy, I contend that journalists rely on a set of Cold War logics to describe the country. These logics include setting up a dichotomy between "us," represented by the Anglo-Western world, and "them," the North Korean enemy. They also engage in reductive descriptions of North Korea, suggesting that North Korea's only value as a news item comes from its nuclear capabilities. As journalists describe practicing journalism coverage of North Korea, they foreground two specific articulations of identity. On one hand, some journalists assert the salience of ethnic and/or national identity in creating news narratives, while others highlight how their professional identities as journalists contribute to their reporting. Through journalists' discussions of identity, I explore the way foreign correspondents and local or ethnically Korean journalists converge and differ in how they imagine and cover North Korea.

The second half of the chapter focuses on the rationale for the current state of North Korea coverage. First, I discuss the three strategies journalists use to distance themselves from reductive coverage of North Korea: (1) using "postcolonial reflexivity" (Nothias, 2020) to talk about trying to avoid sensationalism in their own journalism practice, (2) differentiating between their reporting and "other" news outlets who are either less reputable or have less rigorous sourcing practices, and (3) blaming North Korea's behavior. Next, I discuss two ways that journalists justify their narratives about North Korea. Journalists use the lack of information coming out of North Korea, and the country's own behavior, to justify their coverage. They also suggest that their imagined audiences are hungry for news about North Korea that fit into these Othering narratives.

I begin with a discussion of how Cold War ideology, particularly narratives of the Other, pervade journalistic representations of North Korea.

1. The Other

When I asked one former foreign correspondent what kinds of frames he used in his coverage of North Korea, the journalist described his news organization as encouraging depictions of the DPRK as "fucking crazy and evil" and Kim Jong Un as a "fat dictator" or other adjectives that "referenced him being fat or rotund" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The correspondent suggested his former employer had justified these kinds of representations by arguing that "[Kim Jong-Un] is this dictator that presides over a pretty unpleasant regime, [so] you kind of have license to insult him" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). These references to North Korea as "crazy" can be traced back to the way Western writers viewed their colonial subjects as possessing "a characteristic lack: lack of complexity, lack of activity, etc.," (Spurr 1993, p. 73).

The idea that news media reflect the "social distribution of knowledge" (Ferguson, 1998)

rings true with international news, which involves covering relationships between nations predicated on uneven distributions of material and social capital. Anglophone coverage of North Korea occurs in a specific political environment, one where "international news from around the world portrays a similar global picture in which the U.S. is a noticeable leader" (Segev, 2016, p. 79). If international news privileges the U.S., then one could argue that other countries are thought about through a bipolar understanding of world politics. Conceptualizing North Korea in relation to the U.S. sets up a dichotomy of "us" versus "them," a hallmark of Cold War ideology. Using this Cold War logic to understand North Korea places the country "on one side of politics along the line reified by the Cold War binaries of (neo)liberal U.S.-Western Europe versus the communist-socialist Soviet bloc" (Choi, 2014, p. 2).

Tim Shorrock, an independent journalist who has been writing about the Koreas since the 1970s and has long been affiliated with *The Nation* magazine, suggests that reporters covering North Korea can become entrenched in this dichotomous understanding of the country (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Anglophone journalism's "obsession" with North Korea's nuclear program is a clear example. One of the key rationales for Anglo-Western media coverage of North Korea has to do with the country's development of nuclear weapons (e.g., Lankov, personal comm, Nov. 2019). Another foreign correspondent put it in stark terms: "It's self-evidently true that [nuclear weapons are] why it's a bigger story than another kooky, unbound country. That's just the case. It's America's number one foreign policy issue. It's the biggest threat to regional stability. They have nukes" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

Journalists' insistence on emphasizing North Korea's nuclear capabilities is especially problematic because as Cohn (2008) argues, "the language in which the case against [nuclear] proliferation is made is ethno-racist and contemptuous" (p. 39). Cohn (2008) points to Western

proliferation discourse as dichotomous, distinguishing between “the (responsible) Self and the (non-Western, unruly) Other” through racialized and gender language (p. 39). By conflating North Korea with its nuclear capabilities, journalists not only come to rely on sources that use this nuclear discourse, but also develop a fluency in it themselves. As journalists tell it, North Korea only matters because of the nuclear issue. But, at the heart of journalists’ explanation of why nuclear weapons matter is not just international security, but U.S. interests. According to Oliver Hotham, the former managing editor for NK News, “as the nuclear program has become more publicized, more of a threat to the U.S., there’s been more interest” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

Even though not all the journalists I interviewed were American, many of them spoke about international media coverage of North Korea through a U.S.-centric lens. An ethnically Korean reporter working for an American newspaper suggested there was a bias toward the U.S. viewpoint, with U.S. news media portraying North Korea as an enemy. However, she pointed to Russian and Chinese news media as potentially providing a different narrative about North Korea, since they are “friendly with North Korea” and “don’t obsess over the little things North Korea does” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The idea that Anglophone media, particularly U.S. media, “obsessed” over North Korea, while Russia and China did not, highlights the explanatory power of Cold War ideology in understanding Anglo-Western news. Anglophone news media’s use of Cold War narratives to “explain” North Korea to news audiences “serve[s] as a form of propaganda as effective as formal censorship, because they reduce our understanding to the lowest common denominators of friends and enemies, monsters and terrorists, heroes and psychopaths” (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 217).

The myth of objectivity ignores the ideologies that become naturalized in news coverage.

As Schudson (2001) suggests, “all journalism is ethnocentric” (p. 164) and cares about the local, or the national, more than international news. These ideological constraints limit the discourse on North Korea, making it difficult to depict North Korea in a way that falls outside of a narrow sphere of consensus and legitimate controversy (Hallin, 1986). An expert I spoke with talked about how these pervasive beliefs about North Korea can lead journalists to create “self-imposed limits on what we think we should be looking for” and that “once a country is demonized, it’s really hard for them to get out of that” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Pedelty (1995) argues that “objective journalism *is* a political perspective,” because journalists must use “ideological orderings, or “frames”” to make the information they encounter legible for their audiences (p. 171). Rosen (2011) calls journalists’ claims of objectivity part of “the production of innocence” or a way for journalists to convince audiences that “the press is neutral in its descriptions, a non-partisan presenter of facts, a non-factor and non-actor in events.” Leon Sigal, director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project and former member of *The New York Times* editorial board, suggests that the ideological constraints of reporting on North Korea are “not just that reporters have their own preconceptions” or that they are drawing their own conclusions, but that “they’re living in a political universe in which the overwhelming attitudes of the American foreign policy establishment is that North Korea is a bad actor” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Sigal argues that it is “understandable why they report what they report,” because they are simply mirroring the beliefs held by most of their sources (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

The ideological bent of North Korea coverage runs anathema to the idea of Anglo-Western journalism as objective. Beijing-based AP correspondent and editor Christopher Bodeen described North Korea as “a very strange place” and explained that “their system is just so completely different” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Tokyo-based *The Times*’ Asia editor Richard

Lloyd Parry characterized North Korea as "a unique state with many features that are extraordinary in the 21st century" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Another foreign journalist claimed that "we're trying to interpret [North Korea] in a way that is as unbiased and as impartial as possible. And for me, that means looking for unscripted moments and trying to make something a little more of just what's presented to me. Which is a challenge, of course" (Personal comm, June 2017). The mere act of trying to "make something" of what is being presented necessitates interpretation and as Hall (1997) would suggest, makes it possible to classify and assign distinct positions based on difference. By describing North Korea in ways that naturalized difference, journalists illustrate the "mythological" nature of objectivity in news.

However, journalists' descriptions of North Korea were considered "factual," such as journalist Andrew Salmon's statement about "the fact that North Korea is a nasty, dangerous, threatening – I would say, by any standard, pretty much an evil state" (Personal comm, June 2017). These kinds of "facts" become naturalized in discourse about North Korea, so that even if "news content may not mirror the facts, but the media, as institutions, do reflect the prevailing pattern of political debate" (Hallin, 1984, p. 22-23). U.S. politicians have commonly used these kinds of descriptions for North Korea, ranging from Bush's (2002) "axis of evil" to Trump (2014) calling North Korea the "last place on Earth I want to go." As Hallin (1984) explains it, journalists are able to appear objective if their coverage falls within the "sphere of consensus," or the mainstream views of U.S. politics. Just as McLaughlin (2016) found with journalists' hesitance to critique Israel, those covering North Korea showed "a certain cultural and ideological disposition among western journalists – a ready receptiveness to the propaganda messages and images that make it apparently incontrovertible realities" (p. 59). As Salmon, whose writing has appeared in a wide variety of publications such as *Asia Times*, BBC, CNN,

and *The Daily Telegraph* put it, "let's not deny the actual bare bones reality of what North Korea is. It is an evil state, by any definition of evil" (Personal comm, June 2017). This "fetish of fact" made it possible for journalists to "deny, disguise and disown the analytical frames that pattern their representations" (Pedelty, 1995, p. 171).

Although American journalism has romanticized objectivity as an ideal, Schudson (2001) argues that journalists also recognize it as an impossibility. Alongside journalists' descriptions of North Korea, they also foregrounded notions of the 'self,' and how their own professional, ethnic, and national identities, informed their coverage.

2. The Self

Through my conversations with both foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists, it became clear that newsrooms in Seoul are liminal spaces. Journalists' discussions of covering North Korea often veered into the ways in which the 'self,' particularly journalists' ascribed and avowed ethnic and national identities, influence their coverage. This was particularly relevant to journalists because of the rise in the number of ethnically Korean journalists working as full-time employees at Anglophone news organizations in Seoul. One ethnically Korean journalist described the transition among local journalists from fixer or stringer roles to staff journalist roles as a recent phenomenon, which occurred around the time of Donald Trump's increased engagement with North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Several foreign correspondents pointed to a trend, or a "paradigm shift," where diasporic Koreans and local journalists who had studied in Anglo-Western countries and worked as stringers or news assistants but had "never really gotten the harvest of their work" because "mostly older white" foreign correspondents would get the byline, were finally getting more recognition (Kretschmer, personal comm, Oct. 2019). Fabian Kretschmer, correspondent for *Die Tageszeitung*, talked

about the recent development that meant having “a quote-unquote Asian face” helped journalists who wanted to be on TV reporting from Seoul (Kretschmer, personal comm, Oct. 2019). Another foreign correspondent speculated these shifts could make it “harder to justify having someone like me here in the future, just because you have a Korean-born Harvard graduate that wants to work for the paper and has really good English skills” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

However, describing ethnically Korean journalists as “local” is somewhat of a misnomer. Approximately one-third of my interviewees were ethnically Korean, but the nuanced way journalists talked about racial, ethnic, and national identities suggests that Korean identity is complex. The journalists I spoke with who identified as ethnically Korean ranged from South Koreans who grew up and were educated in South Korea, to third culture kids who are South Korean citizens but grew up for part of their lives or were college educated in an Anglo-Western country, to ethnic Koreans who grew up most of their lives in an Anglo-Western country and identified strongly with the values and culture of that country. Therefore, making the distinction between foreign and local journalists does not capture the dynamic way that identities fluctuate and change over time, even during a single conversation. In addition, since journalists can perform these identities in unexpected ways, such as the ethnically Korean journalist who described ‘passing’ as an American by calling a North Korean embassy and using English instead of Korean (Personal comm, Nov. 2018), it was difficult to pin down what it meant to be “local.” Given this fluidity, assigning ethnically Korean journalists to “specific cultures in an obvious and uncontroversial manner” is problematic, because it discounts the way individuals in a single culture may hold different attitudes and the way culture can change in both meaning and practice over time (Narayan, 2000).

One ethnically Korean journalist talked about this increase in ethnically Korean staff

journalists as a move to become more politically correct, but also said they did not mind their news organization "using me as their pawn" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). In some ways, the increasing push for newsroom diversity demonstrates an ethnoracial logic (Abad, 2019), which relies on ethnically Korean journalists to do the bridging work – such as developing South Korean government or North Korean defector sources or reading Korean-language media and pitching ideas to their foreign correspondent colleagues – that matches up with their ascribed identity. In the quest for more diverse newsrooms, Anglo-Western news organizations appear to rely on this ethnoracial logic to assume that ethnically Korean journalists can perform culturally and linguistically "Korean" journalistic tasks. At the same time, as the ethnically Korean journalist above suggested, she was happy to move from working as a poorly compensated stringer to a full-time staff journalist job at an Anglophone news organization.

In addition to the top-down ascription of ethnoracial logic in hiring decisions and assumptions about ethnically Korean journalists' roles in Anglophone newsrooms, the journalists themselves may feel the need to engage in a type of "strategic self-Orientalism" in white-dominated organizations, where they act as "guides and passageways into an otherwise enigmatic and impenetrable community" by accentuating their cultural and linguistic proximity to sources and topics as a way to reap "temporary rewards such as visibility among white peers" (Liu, 2017, p. 799-800). The clash of these two logics – the ascription of ethnoracial logic and the avowal of ethnic identity in a way that can "paradoxically reproduce" Orientalist logics (Liu, 2017) point to the tension that ethnically Korean journalists face working in Anglophone newsrooms. Even as this ethnically Korean journalist described her complicity in embracing her role as a "pawn," she also spoke at length about vocally calling out racism among foreign correspondents and mentoring local student journalists working as stringers (Personal comm,

Dec. 2019).

These tensions likely look different for local South Korean journalists and ethnically Korean journalists who were acculturated and/or educated in Anglo-Western countries, and points to the complex ways that identities are simultaneously imposed and also claimed by these journalists. Several ethnically Korean journalists felt it was part of their responsibility to "make sure my people are represented properly" in coverage of the Korean peninsula (Personal comm, Dec. 2019), especially if they felt "a little more plugged in to the situation here" and therefore, responsible for making sure "we do not succumb to sensationalism or we do not succumb to doing non-news packaged as news" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Even as ethnically Korean journalists celebrated the fact that "so many actual Korean people [are] involved in the process of producing news for foreign media," they also felt pressure to engage in identity-driven coverage (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The Korean journalist expressed that "if some white guy wrote it, they don't care," but that the South Korean public's scrutiny of ethnically Korean journalists meant they had to engage in the "precarious balancing act between appeasing the local government and appeasing western news correspondents and editors" (Palmer, 2018, p. 87).

On one hand, AFP correspondent Kang Jin-Kyu described using "a bit of sarcasm" when covering Kim Jong-Un riding on a white horse or North and South Korea playing a World Cup qualifying game in an empty stadium. He attributed this sarcasm to Western news outlets' inclination "to make a little bit of fun of North Korea" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). However, humanizing North Korea could lead to accusations of sympathizing with the country. Ethnically Korean journalists described receiving "more criticism from the South Korean public about the things we write" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019), which can lead to news organizations deciding "out of protectionist measures to put a white male byline" on potentially controversial stories

(Personal comm, Dec. 2019). One example is the criticism the AP bureau in Pyongyang received after they first opened in 2012 for their "soft" pieces about everyday life in Pyongyang.

> "Like why are you guys being so sympathetic to these people? Why are you portraying them in a light as if North Korea is not "a communist country" or [commits] human rights abuses? It's not like the journalists aren't aware that there are human rights abuses. It's just that there are still people who are living normal lives, and just doing normal things." It's worth noting how life is different in North Korea, not just from the perspective of they're all suffering. That seems like a very drastic way of covering an entire country" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

As the ethnically Korean journalist above noted, she did not want to be accused of being sympathetic to North Korea but did want to humanize the country in some way. At the same time, she noted that "life is different in North Korea," suggesting coverage of difference that was not based on a spectatorship of suffering that "construes human life in the zone of suffering as the West's 'other'" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 10).

Journalists' narratives about North Korea did not always neatly fall in line with their ethnic identity, but ethnic identity played a role in orienting the way journalists viewed North Korea and approached the practice of covering the country. Ethnically Korean journalists often expressed the view that language ability and cultural competence are influential factors in reporting on North Korea. Their stories relied on a humanizing or affective lens to color their descriptions of the country, as they relayed personal stories of learning about North Korea while growing up in South Korea or through their Korean American communities. AFP correspondent Kang Jin-Kyu talked about his experience of wanting to become a journalist after watching the 2000 Inter-Korean summit between South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). He went on to explain how cultural identity can inform journalists' interpretations of the events they observe, such as South Korean president Moon Jae-In's delegation visiting Pyongyang and being provided with a buffet of food. He went

on to talk about how "the Western media would sort of mock North Koreans saying that, "Hey, you're the country with people dying out of hunger." That's the view of Western media, but for Koreans, in Korean culture, when you have your guest in your house, you do your best" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

These kinds of culturally informed understandings of North Korea, and of journalists' roles in covering North Korea, were prevalent in conversations with ethnically Korean journalists. However, this "affective proximity" between ethnically Korean journalists and their nuanced understandings of North Korea can "get ignored when journalism is exclusively defined by the values associated with distance" (Al-Ghazzi, 2021, p. 12). Although ethnically Korean journalist Eun-ji K. described how the increase in "people of Korean descent criticizing reports that they see" had led to more accountability in reporting on North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019), *The New York Times*' Seoul bureau chief Choe Sang-Hun, who was often mentioned by other journalists as an exemplar in reporting, suggested it was important for him to develop the skill of seeing the Korean peninsula from a foreigner's perspective (Personal comm, June 2017). Several ethnically Korean journalists described how it was not just their ethnic identity, but also their experience of having lived and grown up "elsewhere" that provided them with a unique, "third-person perspective" to their reporting on North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). A South Korean journalist described local journalists' value in providing "Korean experience and knowledge," while her foreign correspondent colleague would provide an "international perspective" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). According to the journalist, foreign correspondents' "international news judgment" related to their ability to understand what an international news audience would find interesting.

On the other hand, some ethnically Korean journalists critiqued distance from the topic or

place one is covering, suggesting foreign correspondents often generate problematic narratives. Some ethnically Korean journalists suggested that “these sensational stories about North Korea, and looking at it as a very cartoonish country, and providing a caricature of the country, I think that happened a lot when a bunch of white people were writing, to be honest” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The critiques I heard from ethnically Korean journalists echoed the broader criticism about foreign correspondence, such as problems with older, white, male foreign correspondents parachuting in (Personal comm, Dec. 2019) and journalists who “come into a culture and you’re like, ‘This is so fascinating because I as an American have never experienced this before,’ and you think that because you’re white, your Western perspective is the only perspective that matters or the normal perspective, so to say” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The ethnically Korean journalist went on to characterize the “misinformed stories that have come out about South Korea and North Korea and, frankly, Asia” as a form of Orientalism by foreign correspondents who are “mystifying this place as an Oriental society that has all these strange traditions” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

However, conflating cultural understanding with one’s ethnic or national identity is problematic, given the research that argues diversity in newsrooms does not necessarily equate to diversity in content (e.g., Steele, 1994; Johnston & Flamiano, 2007). As conversations with journalists showed, perceptions of North Korea do not neatly fall in line with a journalist’s ethnic or national identity, especially for some ethnically Korean journalists educated and acculturated in Anglo-Western countries. For example, ethnically Korean journalists were not immune to using Othering narratives, such as describing North Korea as “a strange country” and “not a normal country” when talking about a World Cup qualifying game between North and South Korea that played out in an empty stadium (Kang, personal comm, Oct. 2019). Former BBC

journalist Subin Kim talked about how when he first began reporting on North Korea, he was interested in every nuclear development or missile test, but that his interests had expanded over time (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

In fact, the critiques detailed above describe the problem as a "Western perspective," which is not always synonymous with being white. This perspective may also have to do with experience; several ethnically Korean journalists suggested that "spiralist" foreign correspondents were unable to spend enough time building up in-depth knowledge about North Korea (Personal comm, Dec. 2019; Lee, personal comm, Feb. 2020). However, long-time freelance journalist Jason Strother, who has reported for various news outlets including radio coverage for PRI's *The World*, Voice of America, and NPR, argued that reporting from Seoul allows him to "provide context to a story, to give it more nuance, to be able to provide the historical background, and also report on and kind of take the temperature of what's happening on the street here" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). He then self-reflexively suggested that his linguistic limitations and his "expat bubble" of friends may also limit him. For freelance journalists, language abilities are bound up with tangible material concerns. Freelance journalist Bruce Harrison described the tension between being honest about how much Korean you can speak, but that "part of me didn't want to say that I don't speak Korean, because maybe they would pass on the job" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Since freelance journalists work for many news outlets that do not have a permanent presence in Seoul, but do not have the same resources and infrastructure as larger bureaus with local and ethnically Korean staff, freelancers' reporting may not have the same kinds of checks and balances that news organizations with formal bureaus enjoy. Several ethnically Korean journalists who worked for news organizations with larger Seoul bureaus talked about the importance of this two-way process of foreign

correspondents pitching ideas to local journalists, and vice versa, as a way for local journalists to provide cultural perspective and for foreign correspondents to bring in awareness of what kinds of news angles would appeal to Anglophone audiences. These constraints remind us that even when ethnically Korean journalists use their affective proximity to provide nuanced views of North Korea, they also still work within the confines of existing news organizations and the broader Anglo-Western framework of news media as an institution.

One foreign correspondent described how a journalist's role often extends to "trying to teach people about North Korea," especially copy editors or line editors sent to Hong Kong for a one or two-year stint. He described teaching one of the editors to "become a filter" with the KCNA news feed so that the editor could "look at the whole volume of twenty odd offerings every day from KCNA and would sit there and say, "Yeah, none of this is important"" (Personal comm, October 2019). NPR's Seoul correspondent Anthony Kuhn attributed this tension to the "lack of literacy in the media about Asia and Asian news," particularly among U.S.-based producers and editors. He talked about editors who often have experience with the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East, but have spent no time working in Asia. Kuhn argued that editors without experience in Asia often do not understand why certain stories are newsworthy.

> "We have a lot of young producers and editors who are not really current, or fluent, or literate in Asia news. So, when we're trying to pitch some story, it doesn't ring a bell with them. They don't realize how it fits into the picture — They don't see why it's worth telling people about. It's important for those people to come out here, get their feel wet, find out who the players are, develop a sort of personal interest in what happens next. And when they do, the experience of reporting it is like, "God, this is amazing. I really want to find out what happens next. I want to see what happens to him, and him, and her" (Kuhn, personal comm, Nov. 2019).

According to an Asia-based CNN staff member, disagreements between editors and journalists about what to report on can lead to "a very annoying internal battle" between journalists and their editors, where journalists decide not to report on the rumor, only to have an

editor ask about the story again (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Ethnically Korean journalist Eun-ji K. described the experience of pushing back on edits that made the story sound more dramatic. She went on to describe writing a story about information dissemination in North Korea, only to have the article paired with artwork depicting Kim Jong-Un with a rocket shooting in the background (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). In this case, Eun-ji had no control over the narrative; instead, the narrative was imposed on her. These instances of foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists pushing back problematic representations of North Korea also points to the ways journalists sometimes lose control of the narrative. It also illustrates the ubiquity of these narratives and how difficult it is to break out of using them to describe North Korea.

This next section examines the rationale journalists provide for why problematic narratives about North Korea make it into news coverage of the nation.

3. Self-Reflexive Distancing

My conversations with journalists showed that they are largely aware of the sensationalistic and limited narratives about North Korea circulating in news media and popular culture. Although journalists acknowledged the problematic nature of Cold War ideology, including the simplistic images of North Korea as “the bad guy,” they also tried to distance themselves from these narratives. In our conversations, they employed three distancing strategies. The first strategy was to describe their efforts to avoid sensationalism in their own journalistic practice. The second strategy was journalists’ claims that the news outlets engaging in sensationalistic coverage of North Korea were less reputable and/or relied on questionable sources. The third strategy was to blame North Korea’s own behavior for the nature of the coverage. By highlighting their own efforts to avoid stereotyping North Korea, differentiating

their publications from news outlets that sensationalized, and shifting the blame for these narratives onto North Korea, journalists tried to separate themselves from one-dimensional representations of the nation. However, these three strategies functioned as justifications for the current state of media representations of North Korea, without addressing the underlying issue of consistently using Cold War ideologies to inform their reporting.

First, journalists differentiated between sensationalistic and serious journalism about North Korea by distancing their own news judgment from existing news narratives about the country. When asked about sensationalistic coverage of North Korea, one foreign journalist talked about how his colleagues "love everything that's concerning North Korea" and believe news should "fit the expectations, which is Kim Jong-Un is a weird guy, and he's crazy and North Korea is full of wackos, and they love new, crazy stuff. Which is like, "Oh, wow." I'm just trying to get away from that in my reporting" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). By juxtaposing his news judgment with the problematic way his colleagues viewed North Korea, the journalist was able to absolve himself of responsibility for narratives highlighting how different North Korea is perceived to be from the rest of the world.

Similarly, Anna Fifield, the former *Washington Post* Tokyo bureau chief from 2014-2018, talked about using "the same kind of rigor" with stories about North Korea as any other story. "If I see something going crazy on Twitter about Kim Jong-Un's eaten too much swiss cheese and broke both ankles, I'm not going to write that story. So, it doesn't influence me into stretching the rules or boundaries in any way" (Fifield, personal comm, Oct. 2019). Martyn Williams, who runs the North Korea Tech website and was a long-time Tokyo-based journalist for IDG News Service, described consciously making the effort not to cover stories that could get picked up by other news outlets and become distorted and sensationalized, suggesting "it

wasn't worth it because I didn't want to be the one that sparked a new round of bullshit" (Personal comm, Nov. 2017). Several journalists spoke about the speculative nature of stories from 2013 about Kim Jong-Un's orders to execute his uncle, Jang Song-Thaek. They labeled these stories as anomalous and problematic, without acknowledging similar underlying narratives that may exist in stories that cover less sensational topics. By referring to coverage of inane rumors or suggesting that they did not want to be directly implicated in the spread of these rumors, journalists avoided the larger question of how more "serious" news about North Korea could still be problematic. Distancing themselves from obviously sensational narratives allowed them to assert that they were not contributing to narratives that Othered North Korea. However, ideology, such as the Cold War ideology described in the first half of the chapter, is often hidden from plain sight, and embedded into everyday language that depicts North Korea as a threatening enemy. By not acknowledging how this language has become naturalized and, in some ways, institutionalized through a reliance on official sources, journalists sidestepped the broader issue of Cold War ideology's ubiquity in North Korea coverage.

The second strategy journalists used to distance themselves from problematic narratives about North Korea was by differentiating between more reputable news organizations and less reputable news outlets. Matthew Pennington, a former AP correspondent based in Washington, D.C., suggested that there was "a mix of good and bad journalists" when it comes to North Korea coverage, but that British tabloids, such as the *Daily Mail*, are the main source of sensational coverage about the nation (Personal comm, Jan. 2020). Alastair Gale, the former *Wall Street Journal* Korea bureau chief from 2011-2016, suggested that although criticism about North Korea coverage was fair, "what I think is unfair is when people make a general statement about media coverage on North Korea is all bad, it's all unreliable. I think there is good coverage done

by more trustworthy outlets, people like Reuters, people like *The New York Times*, people like us" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Another foreign correspondent pointed out that "The British tabloids, which are nobody's idea of a great standard of anything, when I was first here, their standard tag for any North Korea story would be World War III" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Journalists acknowledged that problematic narratives about North Korea exist, but suggested they were mostly the product of British tabloids. By constantly calling out tabloids as the purveyors of problematic narratives about North Korea, and juxtaposing their unsurprisingly tawdry coverage of North Korea with reputable news sources, journalists created a false dichotomy of North Korea coverage – "good" coverage from well-respected sources and "bad" coverage from tabloids. The underlying message was that reputable sources were not a part of the problem.

Third, journalists justified coverage of North Korea by pointing to the country's own behavior as problematic. Christopher Bodeen, an AP correspondent and editor based in Beijing, China, talked about how news media organizations sometimes take a "sophomoric approach to the North Korean tropes," but that this kind of coverage has to do with "the acknowledgement that North Korea is a very strange place" and that "their system is just so completely different" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). John Power, a freelance journalist previously based in Seoul who wrote for South Korean outlets like the *Korea Herald* and Yonhap, as well as *The Diplomat,* Vice, NK News, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, put it this way:

> "I think a large part of the reason why North Korea receives such fatuous coverage is because it is genuinely a complete outlier in 2019. It is a very unique country, it is a very repressive country, it is a very, it's a country really without any comparison. So, I don't think it's without any foundation that North Korean news coverage is largely negative, to be fair" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

As Power suggests, local and foreign journalists are aware of the "fatuous" coverage of North

Korea and actively try to avoid this kind of coverage and misrepresentation of the DPRK. At the same time, they justify "negative" coverage of North Korea by continually drawing on the narrative frame of North Korea as a threat and the Cold War ideology of North Korea as different from the rest of the world. Conversations often led to the conclusion that North Korea itself was to blame for the stereotypes that audiences and journalists thought were rightfully used to represent North Korea in news media. These conversations suggest that even when journalists are careful not to stereotype North Korea, they may still interpret North Korea through a lens of difference. This kind of internalized Orientalism can "lead to Orientalist traps by accusing society and people for their struggles instead of examining how such events happen in relation to postcolonial politics" (Alahmed, 2020, p. 422).

According to Jean Lee, former AP Koreas bureau chief from 2008-2013, North Korea "deliberately makes its presence known through bad behavior" and "makes itself important by virtue of being a global threat to international security" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Lee argues that nuclear testing and missile launches "force us to pay attention" to better understand the country and to find a resolution (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Here, Lee works within the existing geopolitical frameworks to give meaning to North Korea's actions, making value judgments such as labeling the regime's behavior "bad" and using rhetoric that suggests North Korea is "forcing" journalists to pay attention. Although in some sense, journalists may feel they are obligated to cover North Korea's actions, based on news values that emphasize the importance of conflict and drama, or they may feel institutional pressure from their editors and news organizations more broadly, this explanation suggest an inevitability that is not real. Blaming North Korea, and particularly the Kim regime, for Anglophone news coverage of the country is similar to McNair's (1988) findings on British coverage of the Soviet Union. McNair

(1988) found that journalists argued “the Soviets themselves have made it difficult for journalists to gather news on the themes of their choice” (p. 54) and that this reticence meant journalists needed to fill the “information gap” (p. 55). This next section addresses how journalists use the narrative of information scarcity to justify their coverage of North Korea.

3.1 Information Scarcity

As I spoke with journalists, a clear trend emerged: journalists talked extensively about the scarcity of information coming out of North Korea. Journalists covering North Korea defined information scarcity in several ways. John Power, who was previously based in Seoul as a journalist with various news organizations, defined it as a lack of access. He suggested that “it would be easier to present flattering coverage of a country like North Korea if you could get a press pass and go into North Korea and freely report about the place, but that’s just not the country that it is” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Similarly, another foreign correspondent described how it was “really, really difficult to get any facts at all,” even as a visitor inside of the country (Personal comm, June 2017). He went on to describe how this lack of information could lead to problematic narratives.

> “I think in the absence of information, of reliable information, especially with a country like North Korea, which is basically an information black hole, people will jump to conclusions as with any situation. A lot of North Korean culture and ideology and imagery lends itself to a sort of sensationalist understanding” (Personal comm, June 2017).

According to this foreign correspondent’s explanation, since information about North Korea is hard to come by, people fill in the blanks by relying on their interpretation of “North Korean culture and ideology and imagery” to flesh out their reporting. Shibutani (1966) argues that the convergence of interest in a topic and limited access to information drives the creation of rumors. When there is no clarity about a topic, but people are seeking information, news becomes a way

to socially make sense of information and communally guess at answers. In terms of North Korea coverage, Reuters journalist Shane Hahm talked about his purpose to "provide as much information as possible because it's so hard to find information, or to get information that the average person might never have access to at all" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). However, when journalists do not have access to information about North Korea, and when they rely on that narrative of information scarcity to describe North Korea, it becomes easier to rely on existing narratives and rumors to fill the gap.

Journalists commonly pointed to rumors as a natural outgrowth of the scarcity of information about North Korea. Because North Korean officials generally do not provide direct comments or push back on individual journalists for erroneous reporting, some of the journalists I spoke with suggested there are no real consequences to reporting things that turn out not to be true. There was a sense that journalists could fill the void of information with anything they wanted and not suffer the same kinds of sanctions that journalists from foreign news organizations face in other authoritarian contexts. A former foreign correspondent described how the North Korean regime "[doesn't] attack you for being wrong about them" and that in "North Korea analysis and reporting, people really can say something without fear of being corrected" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Just as "the Soviet Union was its 'own worst enemy' when it came to putting its case across to western publics" (McLaughlin, 2016), journalists felt that North Korea had helped create a perfect storm for reporting on rumors and that "it takes real discipline and some sense of standards to walk away from some of this stuff" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

A former foreign correspondent related the idea of scarce information to the "tendency to get overexcited about whatever seems to be happening with North Korea, whether it's really happening or not. I think this is a problem that the whole media has with North Korea because

you don't really know what's going on over there, so you end up speculating" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Critiquing this tendency, one ethnically Korean journalist questioned the newsworthiness of the topics news media chooses to cover, such as Trump tweeting and calling Kim Jong-un "rocket man, asking "in terms of the ecosystem of information, have we done more harm than good in that?" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Another ethnically Korean journalist suggested that journalists themselves have as much to do with the spread of misinformation about North Korea as social media platforms, mentioning that "once it's out there, you lose control of the information" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The problem with reporting on rumors or justifying sensational news coverage of North Korea is that even when corrections are issued, rumors can create a caricature of Kim Jong-un that becomes part of the collective consciousness among Anglophone audiences, who "want to see his weirdness" (Eun-ji K., personal comm, Nov. 2019).

The "information" that journalists talked about using to fill the gap often suffered from what one ethnically Korean journalist described as "the rarity effect," where a lack of comments from official sources made any comment about North Korea newsworthy (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). One former foreign correspondent in Seoul described pitching an interview in 2012 with Moon Jae-In, who is the current president of South Korea. Moon was one of three candidates at the time, but the other two candidates were thought of as the frontrunners. The correspondent worked to secure an interview with Moon and wrote his editor, only to have the editor turn down the pitch.

> "Yeah, their attitude to that election was just well, when somebody wins, let us know. But if anything about North Korea at all happens, then they wanted it. Whether it's real or nothing" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

North Korea Tech's Martyn Williams argued that "because there's so little information, every little bit of information seems more weighty or relevant at first sight than it is. . . I think there's a danger of ascribing too much value to something" (Personal comm, Nov. 2017). Exaggerating existing information, or giving any morsel of information value, meant that journalists were left to define their own editorial standards about what qualifies as North Korea "news." Former freelance journalist Eun-ji K. talked about the "alarming" editorial standards among the publications she had worked for and described formulating her own set of standards, including refraining from quoting academics that cite numbers or statistics off the top of their head, caveating defector statements that are difficult to verify, and relying on official government sources for reporting on North Korea's nuclear program. Ultimately, her standards rested on other journalists; if something was reported in two other news outlets, that would be enough to make the claim in her own reporting (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). In addition, journalists struggled with the deadline pressures that constrained how much time a reporter had to verify information about North Korea. One foreign correspondent described how easy it is to "spit out a potentially very alarming headline," but that you had to be careful "not to send something that's going to start World War III" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

In addition to the general lack of information coming out of North Korea, another definition of information scarcity focused specifically on information about the North Korean regime. Anna Fifield, the former *Washington Post* Tokyo bureau chief who has been to North Korea thirteen times, defined scarce information as having "little basic information about North Koreans, both ordinary peoples' daily lives and how the regime operates" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Although Fifield felt that she could provide "a sense of humanity" to the DPRK by talking about some of the diversity she had seen in ordinary North Korean citizens' lives and by

showing that North Koreans "worry about the same things as we all do," she explained that writing a book at Kim Jong-Un made her conscious of "how little I know about Kim Jong-Un and these huge holes in his life story, but also our understanding of how he runs the regime, who his advisors are, how he makes decisions. We just have no idea whatsoever" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

Getting information about the North Korean regime, as opposed to information about daily life in North Korea, illuminates the quandary of the limited pool of sources with knowledge about North Korean politics. Journalists were self-reflexive about how a lack of access to information they valued, particularly information from official sources, influenced their journalistic practice. Given the constraints to eyewitnessing, they relied on "evidence of evidence" or "indirect signs of veracity as a respectable form of evidence, complementing but sometimes displacing independent verification" (Godler & Reich, 2017, p. 571). This "trust-based view of news gathering" emphasizes the importance of social interaction between source and journalist in making decisions about what is true and what to include in one's reporting (p. 560). Although relying on official sources is commonplace in journalism, for North Korea in particular, secondhand knowledge informs the bulk of news narratives about the country. As journalists depend on others to provide them with information, they are also dependent on their sources' descriptions and interpretations of North Korea in constructing news narratives about the nation. Since there is a finite pool of sources with expertise about North Korea or who have access inside the country, journalists are constrained in the kinds of narratives they are able to create. Former Seoul bureau chief Alastair Gale of the *Wall Street Journal* described becoming "exasperated with the challenge of journalism on North Korea" and moving to Japan, where he found it was possible to "actually go and ask people for data and information" (Personal comm,

Oct. 2019).

> "The temptation to just go ahead and write it anyway, because it's a good story, is very strong. Lots of people succumb to that and I won't say I have an unblemished record. But you want a story which you know is accurate and true, it's kind of near impossible in North Korea coverage, apart from something that's observable or outside the country" (Gale, personal comm, Oct. 2019).

The problem of scarce information allows journalists to rely on other sources, who supply their own interpretations of North Korea. Since journalists can quote these sources verbatim, and call it opinion, they are relying heavily on existing narratives from a small pool of people for information about North Korea. The "social context of knowledge creation, specifically journalists' deep and extensive epistemic reliance on others" (Godler, Reich & Miller, 2020, p. 216) plays a large part in the construction of news narratives about North Korea. Through the narrative of scarce information, journalists can attribute problematic narratives about North Korea to their sources, such as U.S. and South Korean officials, or think tank and academic experts, whose agendas often skew the information they share with journalists. In addition, since journalists feel the need to remain skeptical of information that comes directly out of North Korea, they adapt their journalistic practice so that "[e]very time they fart, so to speak, I'm not going to write about it" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

Journalists' fear of acting as a "mouthpiece for the North Korean government" drives them to analyze and interpret information to form a coherent narrative. Reuters journalist Shane Hahm suggested that journalists should "report facts from various different viewpoints, but you stick to the facts" (Personal comm, Dec 2019). Yet, the work of deciding which facts make it into news narratives still requires journalists to engage in gatekeeping, filtering information, and as one foreign correspondent put it, being a "responsible voice for the people" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Depending on how journalists perceive who their news audiences are, their news

narratives can also change. The next section discusses how journalists' use their imagined audiences to justify problematic narratives about North Korea.

3.2 Imagined Audiences

When former *Washington Post* Tokyo bureau chief Anna Fifield talked about her coverage of "how life was for ordinary people" in North Korea, she explained her rationale was to contest the "perception in the outside world that North Korea is still the Hermit Kingdom and everything has remained stuck in Stalinist era time" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). As journalists described what they believe broader news audiences think about North Korea, it became clear that their conceptualization and approach to their audiences can influence "what journalism ultimately looks like as well as what it ultimately accomplishes" (Nelson, 2021, p. 6). In Fifield's case, she wanted to paint a different picture of North Korea than the one her imagined audience believed. However, catering coverage of North Korea to "home" audiences also meant fitting narratives about the country into existing frameworks that resonate with what journalists imagine Anglophone audiences want to know about North Korea (Louw, 2004).

An ethnically Korean journalist conjectured that audiences "want to hear North Korea is crazy" because it is "easier for them to wrap their heads around support for their stereotypes than be convinced otherwise" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Ethnically Korean journalist Eun-ji K. explained that "the kinds of things that I've seen people be receptive to on North Korea is usually stories where Kim Jong-Un is being ridiculous" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). She went on to say, "much of the interest in North Korea doesn't come from a place of compassion. It comes from a place of, "Whoa, this country is so different than ours" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Former managing editor of NK News Oliver Hotham argued that "the general American audience is probably still more interested in North Korea as a freak show" (Personal comm, Oct.

2019). In our conversations, journalists described their imagined audiences as wanting North Korea coverage that aligns with stereotypes of the country, making it easy for them to justify problematic narratives as meeting audience demand. By highlighting what they perceive as a desire for "crazy," "ridiculous," and "freak show" news about North Korea, journalists felt justified in simplifying narratives about North Korea.

According to one former foreign correspondent, "for vast amounts of people, there's limited appetite for the nuance of what's happening" in North Korea (Personal comm, June 2017). Another former foreign correspondent explained it as news audiences wanting more of the "goofball stuff" about North Korea over "really important serious coverage" of the country (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Making North Korea relevant for their imagined audiences calls on journalists to engage in less nuanced coverage of North Korea or as one ethnically Korean journalist argued, "forces you to sensationalize" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). For example, an Asia-based CNN member lamented how "reader interest has slipped as [North Korea] has become more of a story about diplomacy and peace than about potential for nuclear war" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). To keep audiences interested, journalists described emphasizing the threat North Korea poses, simplifying complex geopolitical relationships, and reporting on stories that corroborate what they believe audiences already think about North Korea. Alastair Gale, the former Korea bureau chief for *The Wall Street Journal*, explained that "humanitarian stories don't get the same kind of readership that the military stories do" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Former BBC journalist Subin Kim suggested that South Korean and global audiences may be interested in different topics. When writing for an Anglophone audience, his perception of their interest in North Korea's nuclear weapon program meant he would bring the topic up right

away, but that he would not feel that same pressure if he was writing for a South Korean audience (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

In fact, journalists suggested that the reason why North Korea coverage made up such a large chunk of Anglophone journalists' Korean peninsula-related coverage had to do with audience interest. An ethnically Korean journalist described how journalists working for Anglophone news outlets must write about North Korea because of what she perceived as audience demand, while in South Korean newsrooms, journalists do not have to write about North Korea unless they are interested in the topic (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Long-time freelance journalist Jason Strother described audience interest as one of the key reasons why U.S.-based editors were receptive to North Korea-related stories. He argued that when "Americans' only notion of North Korea is goose-stepping soldiers and missiles in the back of flatbed trucks, they hear North Korea and their ears perk up" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Another driver of what counts as news has to do with the economics of the news industry, as editors and journalists alike place value on metrics such as audience size and the number of "clicks" a story gets. Former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee pointed to the economics of journalism as a reason for sensational coverage of North Korea and the "temptation to write stories that will get clicks" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). According to one foreign correspondent, even well-respected correspondents known for nuanced coverage of North Korea, still have to write the same stories as their competition:

> "*The New York Times* is a good example. They have a very good correspondent here, and he writes good stories, but he also has to sometimes go with the "North Korea said so stories" or, "Are we going into another confrontation?" Experts say, "This might be a new period of blah, blah, blah."" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

One foreign correspondent attributed the pressure to report on unverified information about North Korea as a product of "people are chasing clicks and chasing readers." Although he

did not feel pressured by his own news organization to cover certain stories or angles, he talked about how "everybody wants to be on the story that everybody's talking about that day" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). According to another former foreign correspondent, he felt that sometimes his news outlet missed out on getting clicks because his media organization was "not going for those overly out there kind of stories" (Personal comm, June 2017). Alastair Gale, the former Korea bureau chief for *The Wall Street Journal*, talked about how the British press often runs "explosive, exciting stories," such as North Korean officials being eaten by dogs, "because it will get a lot of readership" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). He lamented standing by and watching as "all the attention was going to other media" who covered these thinly sourced stories, particularly British tabloids and South Korean news media, but not being able to report on it in the *Journal* because "we just didn't think that the information was reliable enough" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Journalists justified their coverage of rumors by pointing to similar coverage from other news outlets and their fear of losing out on the audience interest generated by these unverified stories. When journalists decided not to report on something they believed would resonate with their audiences, they had to accept that other media outlets would benefit from it. In other words, journalists' imagined audiences were used as a justification not just for using certain narratives to describe North Korea, but also for their choices to cover information they could not verify as well.

Journalists who did not believe their audiences needed to be well informed about the specifics of global politics talked about creating simplistic narratives that served to further sensationalize. One foreign correspondent suggested that news audiences do not need complex narratives and specialized knowledge about North Korea.

> "There's specialized knowledge in this world and you can't all be up on it. I mean, I read the Iraq and Syria news, I can't claim to read it in much depth, but if you ask me, "Do

> you read it?" Yeah, I read it, sure. "Can you tell me what happened? Can you tell me what's the Kurdish position right now?" God, no. I can't. It just is too much… You can't know it all. I think people read it but then if they mix up Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, okay… It's not the end of the world. The people who are making decisions, the people who are specialists, they need to know. But the general reader just needs to know, "Here's the bottom line."" (Personal comm, June 2017).

Another former foreign correspondent described putting together stories based on the news wires, then adding context and analysis to it, but pointed out the stories were "not super insightful, it's not super creative." However, he noted that his coverage "does serve a good purpose of kind of conveying to a casual reader, the center, here's what's going on from these various parts" (Personal comm, June 2017). Journalists also mentioned that "inherently simplistic" narratives about North Korea were not just based on their imagined audience, but also on the confines of providing nuance in a breaking news story for a wire agency that would have to "include what happened that day, whatever happened the day before that led to that, and then maybe one line on 70-years of whatever led to that" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

Pedelty (1995) argues this desire to simplify is a hallmark of objective journalism, which relies on reducing uncertainty and complexity to bring "truth" to their audience. As one ethnically Korean journalist explained it, the best thing reporters can do for their audience is to "objectively" explain what North Korea's official statements mean in their coverage. The journalist suggested that if you take what the North Korean regime says, "at face value, you're delivering propaganda" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Embedded in her description of objectively reporting on North Korea is the idea that news audiences need journalists to make sense of the country for them. This kind of "objective" reporting, then, is heavily dependent on what journalists think their audiences should know or want they want to know. Considering the frequency with which journalists discussed Anglophone news audiences' desire for sensationalistic narratives about North Korea, journalists may use frames they think audiences

are familiar with to "objectively" interpret North Korea. On the other hand, some journalists expressed the belief that their role was to supply information to their audiences and let them make their own assessments. One ethnically Korean journalist thought it was important to present what happened, without calling it meaningful, just to inform their audience (Personal comm, Nov. 2018). Another ethnically Korean journalist suggested she could "report on the rumor without saying that this is the truth" and let audiences decide whether to believe it (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

This type of loose gatekeeping role assumes a sophisticated audience that can sift through the information themselves and form their own judgments about a topic, even when they have little knowledge and tools to interpret the information. A former foreign correspondent suggested that "it's not our job to make a judgment for the audience," and that his assumption was "the audience is interested enough and intelligent enough to make their own judgment" (Personal comm, June 2017). He, along with *The Times* Asia editor Richard Lloyd Parry, advocated for journalists to provide "health warnings" when covering rumors, suggesting that "the alternative [of not covering rumors] is essentially to say, "Well, it's alright for me to know about this, but for those others, it's a little bit unhealthy" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). While caveats offer journalists a way to minimize their own knowledge claims (Rom & Reich, 2020), they do not exempt audiences from doing the work of contextualization. Without the historical or cultural context and interactional expertise that journalists who regularly cover North Korea bring to their reporting, audiences can either choose to spend time researching the context or rely on existing narratives and stereotypes to interpret coverage of North Korea. Both alternatives – interpreting North Korea for audiences or asking audiences to do the work – face the same issue. Journalists

and their imagined audiences are constrained by the narrow set of narratives about North Korea that exist in the public's imagination and the sphere of consensus among elites.

Freelance journalist Bruce Harrison suggested that giving American news audiences a "more balanced view of what North Korea does, the potential threat to their lives, and how we rectify the situation" is important, but Harrison concluded that among U.S. audiences, "I think the ultimate opinion is that Kim's a madman and he's a clear threat to their lives" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). This view that news audiences are already set in their way of thinking problematizes the idea that audiences should contextualize information about North Korea for themselves, but also becomes an easy justification for using problematic narratives about North Korea. If audiences are not going to change their mind, how journalists report about North Korea does not matter.

4. Conclusion

Chapter 2 examined the narratives journalists used to describe North Korea and how ethnically Korean journalists foregrounded identity in their discussions of these narratives. First, I argued that journalists' descriptions of North Korea are based on Cold War logics that emphasize North Korea's status as an enemy and naturalize the idea that North Korea is different from the rest of the world. The language journalists used belied their claims of innocence (Rosen, 2011); instead, journalists' descriptions fit into the legacy of historical and present-day framing of North Korea as threatening and different. By treating these descriptions of North Korea as "fact," journalists further entrenched Anglo-Western understandings of North Korea into the "us versus them" binary of the Cold War.

Next, I examined the ways journalists foregrounded the importance of their identities in creating these narratives about North Korea. This was particularly important, given the changing

demographics of Anglophone newsrooms in Seoul to include more ethnically Korean staff journalists. Journalists' discussions of their identities illuminated the ethnoracial logic (Abad, 2019) that undergirds journalism labor for ethnically Korean journalists. Although ethnically Korean journalists were diverse in their language ability, nationality, and cultural proximity to North and South Korea, their ethnic identity became conflated with their ability to perform certain racialized roles. The dichotomy between "foreign" and "local" journalist was further complicated by ethnically Korean journalists alternating between the strategic use of their identities to become visible and valued in Anglophone news organizations and the internalization of Orientalist views. Ethnically Korean journalists' "affective proximity" to North Korea, and their critiques of "white, male" foreign correspondence, were at tension with working in Anglophone newsroom, where Cold War ideology exists "in the deeper presumptive sense" to understand North Korea (Sigal, personal comm, Nov. 2019).

In the second half of the chapter, I explored how journalists' engaged in a kind of 'self-reflexive distancing.' Although most of the journalists I spoke with demonstrated a "post-colonial reflexivity" (Nothias, 2020) about their role in creating knowledge based on problematic narratives about North Korea, they also used three specific strategies to distance themselves. By describing how they avoid sensationalism in their own coverage, differentiating between coverage by reputable outlets ("us") and tabloids ("them"), and blaming North Korea's behavior and culture, they abnegated responsibility for reductive, sensationalistic coverage of North Korea.

Finally, I examined how journalists used a narrative of scarce information and their imagined audiences to justify problematic narratives about North Korea. Journalists described the temptation to produce sensationalistic reporting, particularly since there are no consequences

for those who get it “wrong.” By relying on information scarcity as the rationale for reporting on rumors and perpetuating a one-dimensional image of North Korea, journalists passed responsibility on to North Korea for not being more transparent and accessible. The narrative of scarce information also influenced how reporters thought about journalism practice and the value they placed on eyewitnessing and cultivating certain kinds of sources. This matters because instead of interrogating what we can know about North Korea, the narrative of scarce information says that North Korea is unknowable through “eyewitnessing” (Zelizer, 2007). Journalists may choose only to make cursory attempts to contact North Korean officials, because they usually do not respond. By relying on official governmental sources, including South Korean and U.S. government officials, as well as North Korean state media, journalists capture knowledge and opinions about North Korea that fall within a narrow sphere of consensus (Hallin, 1986) that limits the possible discourse on North Korea.

The way journalists imagined their audience also influenced and, in many ways, constrained the way North Korea is framed and interpreted to help audiences make sense of the country. Just like the narrative of scarce information, imagined audiences provided journalists with a justification for sensational coverage because, they argued, it gave audience what they wanted. However, as journalists grappled with how much of their role is to gatekeep incomplete information, or rumors, about North Korea, they were caught between two difficult choices. On one hand, journalists could simplify narratives to make them easily digestible for audiences; on the other, they could act as loose gatekeepers that provide information for their audiences without inserting their “judgment” on the validity of this “information.” Both came with their set of pitfalls, such as the danger of simple narratives that essentialize North Korea, and the problem with asking news audiences to do the work of contextualization that is usually the purview of

journalists.

Although I focus on both information scarcity and imagined audiences as esoteric concepts, there are real constraints and limitations in the available information about how the North Korean regime operates and how North Koreans live their daily lives. However, the narratives described in this chapter can obscure what is visible. One foreign correspondent argued that despite the “huge limitations” in what foreign news media knows about the inner workings of the North Korean government, North Korea is “not the black hole that some people say it is,” pointing to the tendency to emphasize the narratives of scarce information and of North Korea as “different” for the sake of writing a journalistic account that touts “showing you the side that’s not shown in the news” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Complicating the narrative of scarce information about North Korea requires uncovering how journalists build epistemic authority in relation to North Korea. The next chapter provides insight into how journalists view the role of geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity in covering North Korea.

Chapter 3: Defining Proximity

In her 1949 book entitled, *In North Korea: First Eyewitness Report*, Anna Louise Strong, "the first correspondent to report from North Korea and the only American correspondent to travel extensively through that country interviewing people in all walks of life," details her experience (p. 2). According to Strong (1949), she applied for a visa to North Korea, only for U.S. news agencies to tell her "flatly that they preferred to get the tales of the Soviet zone from the refugees who ran away from it," because they felt journalists would be "watched and handicapped at every turn" (p. 10). Strong went on to report in-person, contradicting details in U.S. press coverage of North Korea at the time, such as the shocking discovery that "there is no Communist Party in North Korea!" and that the press was "strictly out of date" on this fact (1949, p. 15). For Strong, the importance of being there and seeing for herself far outweighed refugee accounts, which she likened to "getting one's facts about London from Berlin during the war" (p. 10).

Strong's account illustrates Anglo-Western journalism's ambivalence toward proximity, particularly the act of eyewitnessing, in North Korea. Even in 1949, U.S. news agencies were skeptical of the restrictions U.S. journalists would face when reporting from inside the newly formed Soviet-backed DPRK. Her account also suggests that the U.S. news media's reliance on stories from refugees is ethnocentric, interested in accounts that align with U.S. interests. As this chapter will show, journalists are still engaging in these same debates today. Journalists remain torn between valuing proximity to the story and the lingering notion that eyewitnessing in North Korea "would get no real facts" (Strong, 1949, p. 10).

Although journalists differed in their views on eyewitnessing in North Korea, I found that two journalists' names kept coming up as exemplars of excellence. *The New York Times* Seoul

bureau chief Choe Sang-Hun was repeatedly lauded for using his deep understanding of the cultural context on the Korean peninsula to color his stories. Journalists often celebrated Anna Fifield, the former Tokyo bureau chief of the *Washington Post*, for her nuanced reporting of North Korea, which she conducted over the course of 13 trips to the country. Much of the praise journalists offer suggest that Choe's cultural and linguistic proximity, and Fifield's geographical proximity, are an integral part of how they tell stories. Chapter 3 explores the role journalists believe proximity plays in their reporting on North Korea. This chapter will answer the following research question:

> **RQ2**: How do foreign correspondents and local English-language journalists describe the role of geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity? In turn, how do they describe the constraints they face, in the practice of eyewitnessing? What role does their cultural identity play in the way they value proximity to the story?

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of how journalists view the role of geographical proximity in their reporting, particularly the value journalists place on eyewitnessing. While some journalists find eyewitnessing to be vital to their journalistic practice, others find it problematic. I argue that journalists' ambivalence is related to their desire to gather information that relates to international security. Next, I examine how constraints to eyewitnessing, including the logistical aspects of going to North Korea and the inability to freely travel inside the country, inform journalists' ambivalence toward being there. Although real, these constraints serve as the rationale for placing value on reporting from outside of North Korea and further dichotomize stories about North Korea. On one hand, journalists want to cover the DPRK's nuclear capabilities; on the other, they write stories about everyday life without exploring what kinds of stories could be told between these two poles. Finally, I ask how journalists think about the role of cultural and linguistic proximity in reporting on North Korea and more specifically, how journalists' cultural identities inform their views on proximity. I argue that reporting on North

Korea is a liminal space where foreign correspondents and local journalists struggle with one another over the value of cultural and linguistic proximity in their coverage of the country.

The internal pictures of what a journalist imagines North Korea is like, based on what they have read, images they have seen, videos they watched, or sources they have spoken to, can influence the way they interpret North Korea. As Chapter 2 discussed in detail, the ideological underpinnings of journalists' beliefs about North Korea are often rooted in their perspectives and understandings of what North Korea means to them, their editors, and their imagined audience. Chapter 3 furthers this discussion by asking how journalists' views of geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity can influence the way they view eyewitnessing. This chapter contends that the practice of eyewitnessing in North Korea is often at odds with normative Western journalism values, such as the privileging of democracy, the role of the press as a government "watchdog," and objectivity.

1. Geographical Proximity

The importance of proximity as an Anglo-Western news value has been well-established in journalism literature (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Hess, 2013). Journalists covering North Korea often use geographical proximity to establish credibility, distinguishing between reporting from within and outside the Asia-Pacific region. Former Seoul-based journalist John Power suggests that pitching a story to an editor by starting off with the line "I'm in Seoul, Kim Jong Un has fired off a missile" has "a bit more of a persuasive aspect to it" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Conversations with journalists made it clear that geographical proximity did not mean being inside North Korea but was loosely defined as being in Seoul or the Asia-Pacific region. NPR's correspondent Anthony Kuhn remarked being in Seoul allowed him to bring nuance to his reporting, juxtaposing it with reporting from "a cubicle in

Washington, DC," which may not have the "right" angle, detail, or color (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Similarly, an ethnically Korean journalist argued that "the danger of covering North Korea is that you tend to write about it from a perspective of comparing it to whatever country you're in" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). She gave the example of South Korean journalists writing about North Korea as underdeveloped in terms of technology, while U.S. journalists might view North Korea as "a horrible, horrible underdeveloped place." This place-based awareness of the world underlined the importance that journalists attributed to geographical proximity in reporting on the DPRK.

North Korea Tech's Martyn Williams described NBC News' April 2017 report claiming the U.S. was in the final stages of preparations for a nuclear strike on North Korea as "all driven by reporters in the U.S."

> "Of course, they're getting fed by the Pentagon or the White House, so then you get into [the possibility that] the government is using media for disinformation and to put stuff out there. None of that reporting was coming from reporters in this region of the world or reporters in the U.S. that had covered North Korea for a long time" (Personal comm, Nov. 2017).

By pointing to sensationalistic reporting about North Korea as a product of relying only on U.S. sources and of reporting from a geographical distance, Williams suggests that journalists who have experience covering North Korea, or those who are working in proximity to North Korea, are able to understand and interpret information in a more measured way. Several journalists mentioned the tensions that these geographically nuanced viewpoints can bring to journalist-editor relationships. Former Tokyo-based Bloomberg correspondent Andy Sharp suggested that because "people in Seoul are so used to, inured, to this North Korea threat, that they will always tend to play down," which he argued meant that "between a Western editor and a reporter in Seoul, there will always be a tension there" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). An ethnically Korean

journalist in Seoul described the tension that escalates between the Seoul bureau and the news organization's headquarters when a North Korea-related rumors emerges and interest is high, "but news isn't exactly coming" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). In these scenarios, journalists face having to tell editors not to report on the rumor but feeling pressure to report on it anyway, especially if their competitors follow suit.

Ethnically Korean journalists expressed similar sentiments about the importance of reporting from South Korea. One journalist reasoned that being in Seoul provides journalists with a different understanding of the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, saying "the facts don't change, but just the temperature of it" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). She explained that foreign media, at the peak of tensions between U.S. and North Korea in 2017, were reporting things like, "Oh my gosh, another missile! They're going to launch a nuclear weapon! It could possibly reach Hawaii and that's American soil!" However, when she went out into the streets of Seoul to interview expatriates about their reactions to the tensions, she found that expats were aware of Anglo-Western media's tendency to heighten the immediacy of North Korean threat. Although Anglophone media coverage had led to phone calls from family members who told expats to "get out of there right now," she argued that "people that have some understanding of South Korea or have lived here, they know it's not something [where they need] to get an emergency box ready and hide under the desk" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). However, the ethnically Korean journalist suggested that being "so far from the Korean peninsula" often meant foreign media coverage of North Korea did not accurately portray the "temperature" of North Korea as a threat.

This story illustrates how geographical proximity can give foreign journalists – just as it did for expats in 2017 – insight into how to create news narratives that do not exaggerate the threat North Korea poses. Geographical proximity becomes not only a credential, but also a way

for journalists to define for their audiences what is and is not important when it comes to reporting on North Korea. While “media templates” (Kitzinger, 2000) can be problematic and reductive, they also perform an explanatory function that contextualizes events and places for their audiences. Freelance journalist Jason Strother, who has been in South Korea for over 10 years, described feeling a sense of responsibility to contextualize his reporting.

> “Let’s say North Korea launches a missile. They want to know are people in South Korea freaking out? Is there a run on canned goods at E-Mart? I feel it is the responsibility of a Seoul-based journalist to give it context. Give the North Korea story context to show that while international audiences only hear about North Korea when it does a nuclear test or a missile test, that they don’t see it as a larger pattern of provocations. You would think it’s much more significant than it actually is. I felt that a lot of my reporting I was always explaining that this is not as severe as you might think it is” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

Strother’s nuanced view of context illustrates the important perspective geographical proximity gives foreign journalists. However, by calling it “the North Korea story,” Strother implies that there is only one narrative of North Korea – and that is how North Korea’s nuclear and missile testing fit into “a larger pattern of provocations.” Even as geographical proximity provides journalists with context that can inform their reporting, it still does not erase the deeply rooted Cold War frameworks used to understand North Korea.

Although most journalists I spoke with agreed on the value of geographical proximity in the broader sense, they were overwhelmingly ambivalent about reporting from inside North Korea. This next section will discuss how journalists value eyewitnessing.

1.1 The Value of Eyewitnessing

According to Donald Kirk, who was a long-time correspondent in Seoul, “any correspondent prefers first-hand observations and interviews when covering the North-South issue” (2006, p. 393). For some journalists, having been on-the-ground in North Korea and having seen the country for themselves gave them “credibility and authenticity” (Zelizer, 2007).

Former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee, who helped set up the AP's Pyongyang bureau, described the importance of reporting in North Korea and engaging in the act of everyday living. She talked about reading North Korean books and magazines, shopping in supermarkets, living through surveillance, sitting through self-criticism sessions, and surviving the extreme cold in winter as reasons why her understanding of North Korea increased during her time there (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Even though she had to work on renegotiating access during each trip, which meant "there's very little time to actually report," Lee argued that her role was different from the foreign media outlets that parachute in to cover specific events (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). She viewed these foreign media outlets, particularly television broadcasters as being "brought in to provide propaganda" footage of the North Korean government, who was using them to strategically disseminate coverage of the event to Anglophone countries. Lee suggested that her frequent trips, however, allowed her to spend time seeing North Korea "between the theater" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

As was the case with Lee, journalists who spent extensive time in North Korea or valued "information" beyond breaking news stories or details about North Korea's nuclear program, were more likely to discuss the merits of being there. Journalist James Pearson described the benefit of observing everyday life. He commented on how it took him weeks to verify a story about currency from outside North Korea, but that a trip to the local store in Pyongyang would have helped him verify it in one day (Personal comm, August 2017). Fifield, who has been to North Korea over a dozen times, pointed out that the "cosmetic" changes she saw during her visits, such as "the explosion of markets" or "buildings going up" made the trips worthwhile (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

However, eyewitnessing is a contested practice among journalists covering North Korea. While journalists valued geographical proximity to North Korea as a way to build up credibility with their editors and news audiences, they also expressed ambivalence toward the practice of eyewitnessing, valuing it one moment and pointing out its limitations the next. Alastair Gale, the former Korea bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*, oscillated between saying that going to North Korea may not be very informative because "[y]ou're chaperoned everywhere and the questions that you ask while you're there, you're given no answers to" but then suggesting, "I still think you should go" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). One foreign correspondent in Seoul, who has never been to North Korea, talked about how going to North Korea could provide interesting information, such as reading the labels on packages to find trends and developments, but then said this genre of reporting is "overdone" and called drawing conclusions from these observations "stupid" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

These contradictory statements about both the value in going to North Korea, but also the constraints of getting what journalists consider valuable information was a consistent trend. In one foreign correspondent's view, eyewitnessing did not provide substantial information about matters of geopolitical importance but could be used to observe incremental changes taking place in the country. The correspondent said:

> "It doesn't help at all on missile or nuclear. But it helps for making general statements like, "Things have been switched up in Pyongyang over the last couple of years." Which we don't use in stories a lot. But it's really more like you just know what's going on in your head and you know sort of know what is totally not true, so you don't repeat stuff that's not true" (Personal comm, June 2017).

Another foreign correspondent, who had not been to North Korea, suggested that "the most insightful stories about North Korea are not being written by those bureaus," referring to the AP and AFP bureaus in Pyongyang (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Eyewitnessing was a way for

journalists to get a "feel" for the place, but as this correspondent suggested, not a way for journalists to get information on the narratives they cared about most – North Korea and its status as a nuclear threat. Anna Fifield, former *Washington Post* Tokyo bureau chief, pointed out that having a bureau in Pyongyang did not necessarily improve reporting. She lauded the two Anglo-Western news organizations with bureaus in Pyongyang, the AP and AFP, for their "illuminating feature reporting" and for capturing some important trends in their reporting. However, she suggested that the wire agencies "never wrote any of the big stories, like all the missile stories or when the Koryo Hotel was on fire. All of that stuff was written out of South Korea" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). By suggesting that the "big stories" are only about missiles or disasters, Fifield illustrates how journalists privilege certain types of information about North Korea. Nossek (2004) suggests that information considered worthy of being "foreign news" was defined as "belonging to the frame of war, terrorism or other type of political violence" (p. 363). Journalists grappled with the tension between valuing the information they were able to gain from eyewitnessing, which was still interesting and often humanizing, but did not pertain to the dominant narratives they preferred to report on, such as North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities.

Since journalism is a discursive institution under constant negotiation, "the way journalists perceive and discursively frame their own practice has consequences for the cognitive roles they embrace" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 128). Journalists' ambivalence toward eyewitnessing is a way to resolve the dissonance between what they think eyewitnessing should be and the reality of it "by adjusting their professional aspirations in a way that brings the journalists' cognitive roles into consistency with – actual or narrated – practice" (p. 129). For example, a foreign correspondent suggested that coverage of North Korea from inside and

outside the country was identical, saying, “literally the difference was a Pyongyang dateline versus Seoul dateline in this coverage” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

Critiques of the Anglo-Western news organizations with bureaus in Pyongyang centered on the question of whether these more permanent bureaus could perform the “watchdog” role of the press or if they would function as “more amplification system than watchdog” (Gitlin, 2006, p. 5). For example, Fifield suggested that the AP and AFP “made some compromises to keep their access, which isn’t serving anyone well” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). As NPR Seoul correspondent Anthony Kuhn put it, long-term stays in the country often led to accusations that the journalists were “tools in the machine of North Korea” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). For example, some journalists expressed skepticism about CNN and Will Ripley’s favorable treatment from the North Korean government, suggesting Ripley’s reporting would sometimes cater to North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2018) and mentioning his nickname among some journalists as “Kim Jong Will.” Many of the journalists I spoke with believed that the North Korean government was strategic about their access to events inside of the country, favoring American and British news networks, like CNN and Sky News, because of their large audiences. An Asia-based CNN staff member talked about how sit-down interviews with officials tend to go to U.S. broadcast networks, “so it’s not like you're necessarily losing out by not being in North Korea. It’s not like AFP is getting first dibs on every interview” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Journalists who had a strong orientation toward the watchdog role made it clear that they were “willing to forego access altogether if the cost of access is surrendering our own ability to say what we say” (Personal comm, June 2017).

Part of this Anglo-Western tradition of a watchdog press calls on journalists to take an adversarial stance toward North Korea, leaving them confined to a limited set of frameworks.

Providing details about North Korea that go against existing narratives, however, is often fraught. An ethnically Korean journalist found that critiques of eyewitness reports from North Korea often dichotomized the coverage as “either pro- or anti-North Korea” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). According to the journalist, the critique suggested that stories about everyday life in North Korea were “pro-North Korea stories,” because they did not fit into the Western narrative of “suffering” people. She posited that because people think it is impossible for North Koreans to be happy, it was hard for them to accept news narratives suggesting North Koreans were “normal human being living their normal daily lives” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Another example is the case of Barbara Demick, the former *Los Angeles Times*’ Seoul bureau chief, who in March 2005 authored a front-page article in the *LA Times* with the headline, “North Korea Without the Rancor.” Demick based the story on an interview she conducted with a North Korean “businessman” in Beijing, who “presented a pro-North Korean view of the North” that dismissed North Korean human rights issues such as the North Korean famine in the 1990s (MacIntyre, 2006, p. 406). Demick’s article “ignited a firestorm of criticism on the web,” with critics comparing Demick to Walter Duranty, former Moscow bureau chief for *The New York Times*, who was discredited for pro-Stalin reporting on the 1932-33 famine in the Soviet Union. By “veer[ing] from the demonization script,” critics accused Demick of sympathizing with the North Korean government (MacIntyre, 2006, p. 407).

These examples illustrate how the Cold War framework narrows journalists’ ability to veer from the narratives already in place. One expert who works closely with media outlets talked about how broadcast media’s “favorite shot” of Pyongyang is often “an empty North Korean street, except that one street over, there’s a traffic jam” (Personal comm, Dec 2019). However, when he offers this perspective to journalists, he is often criticized for defending North

Korea, even though he simply wants to show the journalist "that it's more complicated than what you're trying to show" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). The "important" stories about North Korea are related to spectacle, suffering, or "Western alarmism" (Gusterson, 1999) about North Korea's nuclear weapons.

Despite the limited set of narratives journalists use to describe North Korea, Zelizer (2007) points to photography as "an alternative way of claiming eyewitness status that offset the limitations of verbal narratives" (p. 417). Most journalists found the practice of visual eyewitnessing, particularly capturing photos and videos, valuable. A local journalist mentioned that pictures allowed journalists and their audiences to see developments, such as a more recent shift in buildings, from "gray, old, the same Communist building" to more colorful, pastels (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Anthony Kuhn, NPR's correspondent in Seoul, expressed that the value of visual eyewitnessing outweighed the constraints.

> "A lot of people say skip going there. It's not productive, and it can even be misleading. I totally disagree with that. You know, at the very least, they're getting pictures and video. That's a part of the picture. That's a part of the truth" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Mortensen (2014) argues that the production of "eyewitness images" differs from the act of witnessing itself, which privileges the person doing the witnessing. However, in the case of North Korea, there are also limits on what kinds of images can be taken. For example, when the Koryo Hotel caught fire in 2015, foreigners in Pyongyang at the time tried to take photographs of the fire but were "apprehended" for doing so (Pearson, 2015). Limitations on where journalists can go mean that when visiting North Korea for the first time, one foreign correspondent described his experience as "walking into a [Korean Central News Agency] photo album" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). In this next section, I explore how journalists describe the tangible constraints to eyewitnessing in North Korea, and how these constraints inform their reporting.

1.2 The Constraints on Eyewitnessing

As Chapter 2 discussed in detail, although journalists use the narrative of scarce information as a justification for problematic depictions of North Korea, the narrative also highlights the real logistical constraints journalists faced in eyewitnessing. Journalists expressed frustration about North Korea's selective process of allowing international media into the country. Oliver Hotham, former managing editor of NK News, suggested that issues with news coverage of North Korea could be solved "if North Korea did allow more international presence and was more transparent" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). The North Korean government is able to select which events and which journalists they invite to cover the events, such as the New York Philharmonic's visit to Pyongyang in 2008 (Ramstad, 2018), the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Worker's Party in 2010 (Lim, 2010), or celebrations of the centenary of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-Un's rise to power, and a rocket launch (Gladstone, 2012). However, an invitation to the country does not mean journalists have equal access. NPR journalist Louisa Lim (2010) described how "larger networks such as CBS, ABC and the BBC were assigned officials and whisked off to the Arirang mass games," while other journalists were left at the airport for hours. When the North Korean regime invited foreign journalists to cover the Worker's Party Congress in 2016, journalists such as Anna Fifield tweeted about having to cover the event from a television in Pyongyang (Hauser, 2016). During the same event, three BBC journalists were expelled from the country for "being disrespectful" about the country and its leader on camera (Demick, 2016). When journalists were invited to observe the shutdown of a nuclear test site in 2018, journalists traveled over six hours to get to the site using multiple modes of transportation (Taylor, 2018).

Along with journalists' varied experiences reporting from North Korea, another constraint is the general restriction of South Korean citizens from traveling to North Korea,

following the demise of North-South relations and the shooting of a South Korean tourist on Mount Kumgang in 2008 (Herskovitz & Kim, 2008). Although South Korean journalists enjoyed "preferential treatment during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2004)," including access to North Korean factories in Kaesong and witnessing family reunions, tourism, and sporting events in Pyongyang and at Mt. Kumgang (Seo, 2018, p. 1749), that is not the case now. When journalists were invited to watch the 2018 nuclear site closure, a number of South Korean journalists were invited to cover the event, but then their journalists' visa applications were denied (Seo & Berlinger, 2018). One ethnically Korean journalist, who also holds South Korean citizenship, talked about how her citizenship prevented her from visiting the country.

> "I have South Korean citizenship, which means I can never actually travel to the country. There is always sort of that weird feeling of, I'm writing about a country that I can never go to. I get to meet a lot of people who escaped the country. I get to meet a lot of people who were inside the country. At the end of the day, I never get to witness what exactly is going on inside the country. It's a very unique topic in the sense that I would say most of the journalists covering North Korea have probably never been" (Personal comm, Nov 2019).

As this journalist suggested, many news professionals reporting on North Korea have not been to the country, especially not on a journalist visa. Given the limits to obtaining a journalist visa from North Korea, some foreign correspondents mentioned workarounds to traveling to North Korea. Foreign correspondents in China described taking trips up to the China-North Korea border; Demick (2006) called her trip to the border "exploring around the edges" (p. 387). Journalists, such as James Pearson, with Chinese language skills were able to conduct interviews on the border and glean information from recent North Korean refugees. Other journalists talked about traveling to North Korea as a tourist or through a tour company. Fabian Kretschmer, correspondent for *Die Tageszeitung*, described going to North Korea as a tourist and being handed a letter when he landed that stated he would not do any journalistic work while inside the

country, would not be getting any news coverage from his trip, and would have to pay $10,000 U.S.D as a fine if he did engage in negative coverage of North Korea (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Another foreign correspondent was able to travel through a tour company with a small group of journalists but used their reporting to author multiple stories for their publication (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). According to AP correspondent and editor Christopher Bodeen in Beijing, the fluctuating nature of access meant that circumstances could often dictate how much journalists were able to accomplish on a trip to North Korea.

> "It was almost like the mood that the North Koreans were in, whether they had been annoyed by something that [our news organization] had written or just by something that the U.S. government was doing. And they would be holding [our news organization] responsible for it. So, depending on the surroundings or the environment, and the mood of our North Korean handlers, it could either be very rewarding and interesting trips or, they were kind of a hassle" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Besides the difficulties associated with obtaining a visa, journalists also faced the inflated cost of travel to North Korea and the ethical dilemma of financially supporting the North Korean regime by traveling there. The resources a news organization dedicates to North Korea coverage, including whether they rely on newswires for information on North Korea or whether they have dedicated reporters – or even a large Seoul bureau – who can focus on the DPRK, affects the kind of coverage journalists are able to provide. Former NK News managing editor Oliver Hotham pointed out that South Korean news outlets have "many, huge resources to devote to this one topic," whereas that may not be the case for Anglophone news outlets (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Former AP correspondent Matthew Pennington referred to it as a "big gulf between the intensity with which Japanese or South Korean outlets would cover North Korea, to how outlets in Europe would cover it, or in the U.S. for that matter" (Personal comm, Jan. 2020). Pennington suggested that very few media organizations have the resources to retain permanent reporters in Seoul or to even cover North Korea on a regular basis.

The question of resources was even more pronounced when it came to opening a permanent bureau in Pyongyang. Several journalists I spoke with mentioned their news organizations had engaged in negotiations with the North Korean government to potentially set up a Pyongyang bureau, but cited factors such as the price of rent for an office space and the lack of freedom to provide critical coverage about the country as dimming the appeal of having a more permanent presence in North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019; Personal comm, Dec. 2019). According to an Asia-based CNN staff member:

> "It costs a fortune for us every trip because they bleed Western organizations for access. You're paying thousands of dollars for food and drink while you're there. Everything has a foreigner tax" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

Currently, there are several wire agencies with a bureau in Pyongyang, including the U.S.' AP, France's AFP, Russia's TASS, China's Xinhua News Agency, and Japan's Kyodo News. These bureaus are set up based on an agreement with the North Korean government that allows journalists, usually including a photographer and videographer, to spend a week to two weeks at a time in Pyongyang on a rotating basis (Personal comm, June 2017). Only correspondents from Russia's TASS, China's Xinhua, People's Daily, and CCTV, and Cuba's Prensa Latina have full-time foreign correspondents in North Korea (Hotham, 2019). In addition, knowing that news organizations with bureaus do not always get preferred access to media events, such as the closing of the nuclear test site at Punggye-ri or Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang, make a permanent presence in Pyongyang less attractive. The sense that journalists would have no freedom of movement inside the country was one of their biggest concerns, such as this Asia-based CNN staff member's observation:

> "I think it is different because you legitimately can't go and do embedded reporting there. China, we have a bureau there. As much as we're surveilled and harassed sometimes, we can go out and do things, like call people up in China, which I can't really do in North Korea" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

A headline from a *New York Times* article sums up how journalists feel about the constraints to eyewitnessing in North Korea: "Dateline North Korea, but Still Reporting From a Distance" (Hauser, 2016). The headline referenced the experience of journalists, who had been invited to cover the seventh party congress but reported on it by watching a television broadcast of it from outside the event. It reflected the frustrations journalists face when reporting in a highly controlled environment. As Fifield (2019b) explained, "all of the real reporting and the new information has all been uncovered outside of North Korea." This included going to the North Korea-China border to talk to "very, very recent escapees" and traveling to Thailand and Laos to talk to defectors further along their escape route. One foreign journalist who has been to North Korea multiple times suggested that "as a visitor, you can see things but you can't necessarily understand why things are happening. You might be told one thing, but we'd question whether that thing has been told to that person from a reliable source" (Personal comm, June 2017). This wariness seemed to at the forefront of journalists' minds, and one of the main reasons they were ambivalent about eyewitnessing.

Compounding this was the North Korean "minder" or "guide" assigned to each journalist who traveled there. Although minders typically serve one purpose – "to surveil and monitor journalists' activities and intervene if necessary" – Seo (2019) argues that some minders display a "commitment to quality journalism" (p. 1751). NPR's Mary Louise Kelly (2018a) details her own experience with her minder, who for a "not optional" $75 per day, worked as "an interpreter, a fixer, a bridge between our worlds – and a stunningly efficient one-man journalism prevention service." As Kelly's account suggests, journalists often viewed their North Korean minders as both a constraint, but also as a unique way of understanding North Korea. Seo (2019) argues North Korean minders play a dual role that "reflects the conflicting desires of the

Pyongyang regime: to control and surveil, and at the same time, to win favorable coverage and improve the country's profile in the global arena" (p. 1751).

Journalists differed in their interpretation of what it meant to have a North Korean minder with them during their trips to North Korea. One ethnically Korean journalist even pointed out that "calling it access is funny because any information you'll be given will be through North Korea's propaganda ministry" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). He argued that there was no difference between getting information through North Korean state media and going to North Korea. A foreign correspondent talked how there was nothing to see in North Korea, because "I'm not going to write about how a minder is standing next to me all the time, because everybody knows that already and it's not new" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). However, as Seo (2019) notes, minders can do more than surveil and control. Depending in their orientation, they may also act as a "guide" that translates and performs some of the typical functions of a tour guide, a "stringer" by arranging interviews and obtaining quotes for the journalist, or if they possess their own journalism experience, function as a "local reporter."

Some journalists characterized their relationship with their minder as important, for both access and insight into North Korea. One foreign correspondent talked about how a "Westernized perception" of China and North Korea were problematic, but that going to North Korea and trying to "take on board some of the things that our minders were saying about how they see the world" was an important part of the foreign journalist-North Korean minder relationship (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The journalist told the story of going to North Korea and going down to a river on Mother's Day, where they happened on older people dancing. The minders had told the journalists not to ask them to approach the people and talk to them, but

eventually, the minders started chatting with them. They found out that the people by the river were making a video in celebration of Mother's Day.

> "They were like, "You can take some video of us dancing there." But it's kind of one of those moments. I think that was probably my favorite moment, because you always kind of come to a point where you're like, "Ah, yeah. Humans are humans, despite who they have to live under – a despot" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

The moments where minders served as a "guide" or "helper" for foreign journalists (Seo, 2019) were often a large part of what journalists took away from their trips to North Korea. According to *Die Tageszeitung* correspondent Fabian Kretschmer, "the conversations that I had with my minders, especially after the second beer of the evening, you can quite freely discuss about politics if you warm up with them" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). These conversations ranged from topics, such as travel, to more politically charged ones, such as unification. Former NK News managing editor Oliver Hotham described developing friendly relationships with his minders by inviting them for drinks at the hotel bar. These conversations were not a one-way flow of information but a way for journalists and their minders to exchange information. Journalists were not the only ones asking questions; Hotham described being asked about "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland and explaining the differences between Protestants and Catholics to their minder (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). By reimagining the journalist-minder relationship, foreign journalists were able to see their minders as more than an obstacle, but also as a way of gaining insight about North Korea.

> "You get government minders in North Korea and a lot of journalists don't like that fact and will try to avoid their minders as much as possible. I did the opposite, just to spend as much time with my minders as possible to the point of annoying them because I realized that this was the only opportunity that I would have to spending extended time with North Koreans who speak fluent English and whose job it is to tell me stuff" (Hotham, personal comm, Nov. 2019).

As Hotham put it, taking an intellectually humble posture to North Korea often means assuming a worldview that does not center on Anglophone countries like the U.S. He mentioned receiving

advice to frame questions as wanting to learn from the North Koreans they spoke with, instead of asking "hostile questions" that will lead to getting "shut down" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). This also meant thinking through the context in which they are eyewitnessing and interacting.

> "And also recognize that you don't want to put someone in a position where – Imagine you're some branded North Korean person and these white people come up to you and start asking you all these questions and there's some guy from the government staring at you behind them. I mean it's not a pleasant experience, right?" (Hotham, personal comm, Nov. 2019).

One foreign correspondent who has traveled extensively to North Korea pointed out that over time, their access has grown the longer they worked with the same minders (Personal comm, June 2017). As Seo (2019) found, developing close relationships with their minders "sometimes complicated journalistic efforts to provide balanced and in-depth coverage" (p. 1758). However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, journalists' relationships with their minder could sometimes turn contentious.

> "The government minder decides where you're going to stay, where you're going to eat your breakfast, what you're going to see that day, who you're going to talk to. They translate for you. There was a time I had a minder who was really unhappy with me and wouldn't translate. So, I started going up to people and asking questions. Then he, knowing that I could understand, he would translate something entirely different as the answer. And just say what he wanted them to say" (Fifield, personal comm, Oct. 2019).

Fifield's language abilities complicated the adversarial stance her minder took with her, offering a view of how language ability is a way for journalists to make observations that differ from what they are being told. Former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee argued that linguistic abilities gave journalists an advantage in North Korea, since there was no way to hire a local journalist beyond the one assigned to you.

> "In the case of North Korea, when you're there on the ground, if you don't speak Korean and you don't speak their dialect, you're relying 100% on their interpreters. You're not getting the whole picture. It's as simple as that. It's not like you can get fixers on the ground in North Korea" (Lee, personal comm, Feb. 2020).

Balancing between adopting a contentious stance with one's minder and becoming too friendly was part of the difficulty with navigating these interactions. The reality of the all-too-human relationships between minders and foreign journalists is yet another reminder of the ways in which identity plays a role in eyewitnessing. As Lee points out, not only did her linguistic skills help her, but she goes on to talk about how her North Korean colleagues treated her differently because of her Korean heritage (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). This next section explores the role that journalists think cultural and linguistic proximity do – and should – play in covering North Korea.

2. Cultural and Linguistic Proximity

When journalists spoke about cultural proximity, they often talked about what it was *not*. Ethnically Korean journalists frequently mentioned that foreign correspondents suffer from a lack of cultural understanding (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). One ethnic Korean journalist argued that "a freelance Caucasian male cannot report about Korea using just Google Translate," because they would also need a "cultural interpreter" to help them understand the nuances (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). She continued on, talking about how it may be difficult for "monolingual Americans to have to wrap their head around the whole concept of a different culture and language" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). AFP correspondent Kang Jin-Kyu mentioned that for the larger news organizations in Seoul, it is "essential to have Korean manners, Korean language speaking reporters," particularly if the bureau chief cannot speak Korean. For example, he argued that without language ability, an Anglo-Western bureau chief may struggle to understand the "cultural nuance, which is very hard to explain sometimes" of the relationship between North and South Korea (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Ethnically Korean

journalists, whether they were working as fixers or on staff, functioned as cultural interpreters for their foreign correspondent colleagues (Palmer, 2018b; 2018c; 2019a; 2019b).

Cultural proximity, however, was a difficult concept to pin down during these interviews. The journalists who identified as ethnically Korean ranged from South Koreans who lived and were educated in the country for most of their lives to those who claimed a more liminal Korean identity. One ethnically Korean journalist described themselves as a “third culture kid,” or someone who spent significant time in South Korea, but was heavily influenced by spending their formative years in the U.S. (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Other ethnically Korean journalists described moving in and out of South Korea while growing up or going to college outside of South Korea. They were fluent in both Korean and English, with the ability to move fluidly through a variety of environments. Some had South Korean citizenship, but others did not. This liminal space is the direction in which many Anglophone newsrooms in Seoul are headed, with a mix of ethnically Korean journalists that consider themselves traditionally “local” and those who embrace their liminality. However, all ethnically Korean journalists claimed cultural proximity, adding a layer of complexity to what it means to be “local” or in this case, “Korean.”

According to a local South Korean journalist, the advantage of shared culture, such as food and language, changes their understanding of North Korea. The journalist pointed out that “we were one country at one time” and that South Koreans may be able to understand North Korea on a “deeper dimension” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). This closeness to the story, or “affective proximity,” was clear in conversations that illuminated how deeply personal the topic was for some ethnic Korean journalists (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). South Korean journalists particularly felt that there was something at stake with North Korea, emphasizing that there were still

separated families from the Korean War (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). AFP correspondent Kang Jin-Kyu talked about his experience eyewitnessing a family reunification ceremony, recounting that "everybody was sobbing, including myself" as they watched a bus with North Korean families pull away from the reunion (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

An ethnically Korean journalist recounted the story of her mom's visit to North Korea, saying it was "such a different story than all the white journalists saying, "It was useless."" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Her mom's language abilities, coupled with her historically grounded, postcolonial understanding of the Korean peninsula, allowed her mom to listen to conversations and make observations. During the trip, she learned that the North Korean dialect refers to eggs as "*dak al*," which directly translates to "egg of a chicken," whereas in South Korea, they call eggs "*gyeran*," which is based on Chinese characters. Her mom interpreted this linguistic difference as North Korea's desire to be "independent from Western influences" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). In these examples, we see how cultural identity, which play a "critical role in all post-colonial struggles" (Hall, 2003, p. 234), complicates ahistorical narratives about North Korea as the enemy. Instead of viewing North Korea's enemy status as a new phenomenon, one that is often traced back to George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union or discussed in the context of Trump-Kim relations, journalists' cultural identities supply an important frame of reference for interpreting what they see and learn.

The personalization of North Korea among most of the ethnically Korean journalists I spoke with was in stark contrast to some of the foreign correspondents' insistence on covering North Korea as a security issue with a focus on objective facts. As Al-Ghazzi (2021) suggests, "affective proximity" is an often-ignored part of local journalistic labor, but it can shed light on "how the labour and input of locals is side-lined when dismissed as emotional and biased, and

when journalism is narrowly conceived as an intellectual endeavour based on the professional norms and values of objectivity, neutrality and distance" (p. 3). Similarly, the constraints of narrating North Korea through a Cold War framework mean that journalists' cultural proximity can also be considered problematic. This is akin to the way journalists contend that South Korean official sources and news media are unreliable because of their highly partisan orientation. Conceiving of North Korea only in terms of its value on the world stage, and only as a nuclear enemy, relegates journalists with cultural proximity to positions based on ethnoracial logic, such as performing the functions of a fixer or news assistant without the byline or input into framing the story. Based on journalists' conjectures about what their imagined audiences want to know about North Korea, affective proximity becomes a handicap because it can invite journalists to consider what lies between the standard nuclear stories and stories about how North Koreans are humans too.

In the context of eyewitnessing in North Korea, former AP Korea bureau chief Jean Lee argues that cultural proximity matters. She said, "They treated me differently. I think that that's really important. I mention this sometimes to Korean American journalists to try to encourage them to see what kind of role they can play, and to see that they have a role to play." Lee pointed out that for Korean American journalists, there is "a competitive advantage, a cultural advantage, and you shouldn't be shy about taking advantage of it" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). At the same time, one ethnically Korean journalist posited that "pretending to be American" (i.e., speaking in English instead of Korean) was helpful when he called the North Korean embassy for UNESCO in Paris, because speaking Korean may lead them to "put their guard up" (Personal comm, Nov. 2018). The ethnically Korean journalists who had experience living abroad and were able to navigate between various cultures and languages displayed a versatility in the kinds of "front

stage," or performative interactions (Goffmann, 1959) they were able to have in their Anglophone newsrooms, where they might make Anglo-Western cultural references, or with Korean-speaking sources. In the journalism field, cultural proximity becomes a tool that journalists can use to perform their identity for a strategic purpose, such as cultivating sources or interacting with their colleagues. However, as news organizations commit to increasing diversity, cultural proximity can become commoditized. Thomas (2019) calls this "the economization of diversity," or the "conversion of diversity principles and practices into economic ones" (p. 481). The practice of economizing diversity is a profound part of the debate on foreign correspondence and language ability. Although most journalists agreed that it would be ideal to have Korean language skills, there were a wide range of opinions on whether it was necessary for "good" coverage of North Korea. Foreign correspondents lamented not learning more Korean during their time in Seoul, citing tight deadlines for their news outlets and the inability to make the significant time commitment it takes to learn a language (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Alastair Gale of *The Wall Street Journal* talked about how easy it is to get by in South Korea without advanced Korean language skills.

> "I didn't speak any Korean when I arrived, and frankly I didn't speak much Korean when I left. Well, I have various excuses for that. Basically, I found the level of English in Korea was relatively high, particularly if you're dealing with people in the government or people in large businesses. They have pretty good English, in fact better than in Japan. That made life easier. Also, my colleagues were actually fluent in English, so there was less means to learn the language. I'd made an effort and didn't make a whole lot of progress, which is probably my biggest regret about my time in Korea" (Gale, personal comm, Oct. 2019).

In May 2020, this ongoing debate about language was on clear display. After the resolution of rumors about Kim Jong-Un's health, an op-ed speculating about why news media had gotten the details wrong sparked various reactions on Twitter. The op-ed, written by Se-Woong Koo, posited that Western journalists' inability to speak Korean contributed to the

rumors. Koo is the publisher of Korea Exposé, a news outlet whose purpose is to "transcend both the simplistic coverage that characterises much of the foreign reporting and the ideologically charged content that many Korean media outlets pass around as news" (Korea Exposé, (n.d.)).

> "In my five years on the English-language media scene, I have met not one Western reporter covering the Korean Peninsula who could speak Korean fluently. Whether a foreign language skill is imperative to have when reporting abroad may be debatable, but in the context of North Korea coverage, not speaking Korean means sidelining from the global conversation qualified experts who do not speak English – of whom there are many in South Korea" (Koo, May 6, 2020).

The op-ed was shared by multiple journalists on Twitter and, although there were problematic aspects to the piece[1], the ensuing conversations sheds light on the debate about language ability and reporting on North Korea. Steve Herman, who was the Voice of America's Northeast Asia bureau chief based in Seoul from 2010 until 2013, argued that a journalist's ethnicity was not important (see Figure 1). He went on to separate language ability from ethnicity, but then seemingly conflated ethnicity with language by referring to "native Korean speaking reporters." Victoria Kim, the Seoul correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, also pointed out there are a "whole host of Korean-speaking journalists" (see Figure 2) without speaking about ethnic or national identity. These examples speak to the complicated nature of cultural and linguistic proximity, especially since not all ethnically Korean journalists are fluent in Korean and may differ in their perceptions of how culturally proximate they are to "Korean" culture. Conflating ethnic identity with language ability, for example, may suggest that ethnically Korean journalists are automatically culturally proximate, even when they lack the Korean language skills to report without a translator.

[1] Koo points out that Western reporters cannot speak English but ignores the local South Korean journalists that work for these Anglophone news outlets. My analysis of legacy media coverage of the rumors about Kim Jong Un's health indicates that the same expert Koo cites in his article, Cheong Seong-Chang, is quoted by the Associated Press, *The New York Times*, and *Daily Express*. The journalists who use the same source, AP reporters Kim Tong Hyung and Hyung Jin Kim, and Choe Sang-hun of *The New York Times*, are all local South Korean journalists with Korean language abilities.

Figure 1

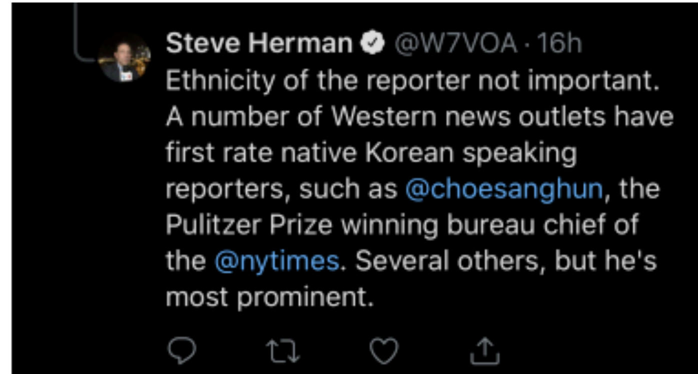

Figure 2

Both Herman and Kim sidestep the question of language ability among foreign journalists by mentioning the local journalists that work at Anglophone news outlets, who can translate language, navigate culture, and find local sources and story ideas for their foreign correspondent colleagues. The journalists mentioned in these tweets are the principal journalist for their respective bureaus – Choe Sang-Hun is *The New York Times*' Seoul bureau chief and Kim is the *Los Angeles Times* Seoul correspondent. However, larger news agencies in Seoul usually have a "spiralist" bureau chief or senior correspondent, who relies on local staff journalists to supply the linguistic and cultural infrastructure for their work. In the "spiralist" model, a new foreign correspondent – historically an older, white male – rotates through the bureau every three or four years. Although the demographics of newsroom leadership are changing, with more wire

services and news publications placing local or ethnically Korean journalists in leadership positions, the importance of linguistic and cultural proximity are still the purview of news assistants and other local journalists who still fix interviews, find story ideas in local news, and translate for their foreign colleagues.

One foreign journalist talked about how their "local staff is absolutely vital" to their reporting, especially since their lack of Korean language ability meant they were "missing a major part of what is said here" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Both foreign correspondents and local journalists spoke openly about the imbalance in responsibilities among the two groups of journalists. An ethnically Korean journalist pointed out this could be problematic for local journalists who were not employed by larger news organizations, but worked in contingent positions as fixers, stringers, and translators.

> "Basically, it's male, old, white journalists that kind of parachute into those Asian nations and they get to write about everything that they want that they have absolutely no knowledge on. And they feed off of this local translator that tells them everything and they normally don't even get the assistant bylines, or let alone any contribution" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

According to Yuan Zeng's (2021) study of foreign correspondents in China, although for "Anglo-American news wires (Associated Press, Reuters, etc.), sufficient Chinese language ability is not only desired, but also required," smaller news outlets find it challenging to recruit journalists with Chinese language skills and "journalistic literacy" (p. 1114). This is also a problem for foreign freelance journalists in Seoul, who have little to no budget for translation and interpretation. One ethnic Korean journalist talked about how foreign freelance journalists would "try to hide the fact that they need a stringer or a translator to seem low maintenance" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). By trying to play down the need for translation, she suggested that a "black market for stringers and translators" emerged for freelance journalists who would hire

college-level interns for less than ₩20,000 per day (the equivalent of less than 20 US dollars) to gather information, while the foreign freelancers are "writing books, they're on panels at Korea experts" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Palmer (2018c) argues "news organizations must stop referring to news fixers as simple "expenses," as lines on the budget report" and to share credit with fixers via bylines or other means (p. 1345). As the Twitter discussion illustrates, foreign and ethnically Korean journalists both acknowledge the value in linguistic ability. But they do not necessarily acknowledge the value of contingent labor, such as fixers, stringers, and translators, and do not engage in a discussion of how culture and language are different.

The growth of Anglophone news bureaus in South Korea, such as the recent openings of *The New York Times*' and *Washington Post*'s news hubs in Seoul, further complicate these questions about the role local South Korean journalists will play, and the dynamics and negotiations between identity, culture, and language in Seoul's journalism labor market. Abad (2019) argues that "a person's racial and ethnic social category influences how their labor is valued, whether their knowledge is recognized, what forms of knowledge are recognized, and whether they can maintain or advance within the industry" (p. 128). For journalists covering North Korea, these ethnoracial logics may complicate what ethnically Korean journalists are expected to do and how they relate to local South Korean journalists, who may differ in the kind of cultural and linguistic capital they possess.

For example, former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee, who identifies as Korean American, talked about how language was key for her ability to eyewitness. She argued that even though her Korean was not perfect, she was able to understand "almost fluently" what was being said. This gave her "a very different relationship" with her North Korean staff than her foreign colleagues may have had" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). She said:

> "And I don't think you have to be fluent in Korean, but obviously being able to understand the culture because you have a shared heritage, and being able to understand some Korean, means your reporting is going to be much more thorough" (Lee, personal comm, Feb. 2020).

Although this dissertation has included both South Korean journalists who were born and raised in South Korea, alongside ethnically Korean journalists who have grown up in both South Korea and in Anglo-Western countries, into the category of "ethnic Korean," journalists' differing language ability and cultural proximity must be further examined. In Herman's tweet, he uses the word "native" to describe Korean speaking reporters, which again suggests the need to understand how ethnic identity and language-related labor at Anglophone news outlets work in relation to one another. Among the ethnically Korean journalists I spoke with, they described various ways they were exposed Korean culture or grew up in Korean households, but not all had Korean language fluency. Since cultural proximity is not the same thing as language ability, these discussions highlight the importance of untangling even further what "identity," "cultural proximity," and "linguistic proximity" mean for journalism practice. Confusing the terms may lead Anglophone news organizations to rely on ethnoracial logic for hiring "Korean" journalists designed to boost diversity. However, without corresponding language skills, local reporters may continue to shoulder the burden of performing translation and bridging functions in Anglophone newsrooms.

3. Conclusion

Chapter 3 examined how journalists working for Anglophone news outlets perceived the role of geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity in their coverage of the DPRK. Journalists loosely defined geographical proximity as being in Seoul or at least in the Asia-Pacific region. Foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists described the importance of understanding North Korea through this localized lens, to establish credibility with editors and to

gain a deeper sense of the context and gauge the "temperature" of events. Although journalists benefited from the perspective that geographical proximity gave them, they still relied on existing narratives – including Cold War rhetoric and comparisons between North Korea and "home" – to inform how they understood the country.

Even though most Anglophone journalists viewed geographical proximity as an important aspect of establishing credibility and contextualizing North Korea, they were often ambivalent about the value of eyewitnessing in North Korea. Most journalists who valued the practice of witnessing had been to North Korea before, often more than once, or believed their cultural and linguistic proximity gave them an advantage in eyewitnessing. In this chapter, I found that journalists' ambivalence toward eyewitnessing was in part due to the real constraints associated with traveling to North Korea and then working inside the country. However, journalists continued to narrow the kinds of stories they told about North Korea by searching for information that aligned with the narrative of North Korea as the nuclear enemy. By privileging information about the inner workings of the North Korean regime, or North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, journalists place less value on the kinds of insight gleaned from eyewitnessing.

Journalists' ambivalence toward eyewitnessing illustrates two points: (1) journalists' ambivalence reflects their attempt to reconcile what they want eyewitnessing to be with the reality of what it is and (2) journalists rely on the constraints of eyewitnessing to justify their ambivalence toward the practice. The former is an attempt for journalists to reframe the normatively valuable practice of eyewitnessing, so they can mitigate the dissonance between their aspirational view of eyewitnessing and their actual practice of it (or in some cases, inability to go to North Korea at all). The latter is similar to journalists' use of information scarcity as a justification for using problematic narratives to describe North Korea and reporting on rumors

about the country. By blaming the North Korean regime for placing constraints on eyewitnessing, journalists can rationalize their choice not to eyewitness. Even though the constraints are real, they do not limit journalists from going beyond their existing Cold War frameworks to reimagine what coverage about North Korea could look like.

This chapter also addresses how journalists think about cultural and linguistic proximity in relation to their journalism practice. I find ethnically Korean journalists, particularly those with more cultural and linguistic capital, emphasize the importance of those elements. Foreign correspondents also talk about proximity, particularly in relation to language. Discussions are couched in terms of what is lacking, such as foreign correspondents who wish they had learned more Korean during their time in Seoul or ethnically Korean journalists who express the problem of foreign correspondents who are neither culturally nor linguistically proximate to the story. Additionally, I find that ethnically Korean journalists conflate cultural identity and language ability. Although foreign correspondents readily express their frustration about not being fluent in Korean, ethnically Korean journalists also tend to operate under the assumption that others will assume they possess both cultural and linguistic proximity. However, conflating ethnic identity with language ability is problematic. If Anglo-Western news organizations hire journalists based on ethnoracial logics, or the assumption that ethnically Korean journalists can do the labor of interacting with other Koreans, then their commodification of diversity can leave local journalists relegated to translation or fixing work. I argue for less slippage between the terminology associated with ethnicity, culture, and language so that we can better understand both the ascription of ethnoracial logic and the avowal of cultural and linguistic proximity in our understanding of how journalists' identities influence their coverage of North Korea.

Chapter 4: The Hierarchy of Sourcing

Andrew Salmon was in Seoul when North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, 2010. He was writing for a British publication at the time and editors who heard about the incident asked him how the mood was in Seoul. Salmon replied, “Par for the course.” He later found out that the publication ran a piece “by an intern who’d just been given a job on the paper” that said war was about to break out.

> ““War imminent on Korean peninsula,” or, “War to break out within hours in Korea.” I read this and thought, “Fuck me, what did I miss?” And actually the source of knowledge for the story was – he had spoken to a travel agent, who had gotten an email from someone saying there’s going to be war in Korea. So, this is the lowest form of journalism” (Personal comm, June 2017).

Given the constraints to eyewitnessing in North Korea, journalists rely heavily on secondhand sources for information about the country. One ethnically Korean journalist referred to this reliance on secondhand sources as “the tricky thing about reporting about somewhere I’ve never even set foot in” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). As an Asia-based CNN staff member put it, journalists know “in the back of your head, we should actually go ask around; whereas, when you know that’s impossible, it’s easier to just go off what some expert tells you” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Relying on secondhand sources of information, particularly when reporting on rumors and unsubstantiated information, can influence which narratives become part of conventional wisdom about North Korea. For instance, former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee talked about how “foreign media are culpable because they pick up a story [from South Korean media] and it’s inaccurate, and it gets picked up then by newspapers around the world, [and] it starts to become fact” (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

McNair (2017) argues that journalists’ unconscious biases are embedded in “who and which institutions are the most authoritative sources of information in a given story” (p. 1320).

This chapter reflects on journalists' reliance on secondhand sources and the implications of why journalists choose to privilege certain sources over others. Chapter 4 answers the following question:

> **RQ$_3$**: How do journalists think about sourcing, in light of the dominant narrative of scarce information? What kinds of sources do local journalists and foreign correspondents consider authoritative and credible in their news narratives about North Korea?

Answering these questions gives us insight into which sources are privileged, even when they cannot be verified. This chapter examines how journalists perceive the "social context of knowledge creation, specifically journalists' deep and extensive epistemic reliance on others" (Godler, Reich & Miller, 2020, p. 216). As Sigal suggests, "Often uncertainty rules, until all you have are opinions. Then the question is, whose opinions are you quoting? And who are your sources?" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). In the case of North Korea, this is an urgent question. As several journalists said in our conversations, the North Korean government does not typically comment on coverage and there is no backlash for erroneous reporting. An Asia-based CNN staff member argued this "lowers the bar" and "makes it easy for lazy reporting about North Korea" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). As Pedelty (1995) argues, "to the extent that U.S. reporters can inject any argument of their own into the news, it is through their choice of sources, selection of quotes, and textual juxtaposition thereof" (p. 100). Examining journalists' rationale for why they prefer certain types of sources over others tells us which voices and perspectives shape news narratives about North Korea.

First, this chapter discusses how journalists describe the importance of government officials as sources. Although government sources occupy the highest rung in the hierarchy of sources, journalists hold varying perceptions of government officials from different countries. I find that journalists generally trust U.S. official sources, adhering to the professional norm of

privileging official sources that align with your "home" country and their foreign policy stances. In contrast, journalists are ambivalent toward South Korean and North Korean official sources. I observe a tension between the professional norm of relying on official sources, but also the imperative to distrust the Other. For South Korean officials, the legacy of colonialism and the conflation of language with culture serve as barriers for Anglophone journalists.

Next, this chapter examines journalists' reliance on other journalists and news media organizations as sources of information. Foreign correspondents – and the journalists in Seoul are no exception – embody the competitor-colleague (Tunstall, 1971) relationship. Their heavy reliance on one another as sources of information not only suggest journalists engage in the friendly sharing of information, but also suggests news organization are driven to keep up with their competition so they do not miss an important story. This dynamic encourages coverage of topics that journalist might not otherwise want to address in their reporting, such as unsubstantiated rumors. Although journalists say they are skeptical of using other news media as sources, journalists' descriptions of their newsgathering routines clearly indicate how much they value Anglophone news media. However, journalists express distrust of South Korean news media, pointing to a lack of media ethics among local news outlets. They are particularly skeptical of South Korean news media's single-sourced stories and their use of defector testimony in their reporting.

Finally, I address how journalists perceive North Korean refugees/defectors as sources. Journalists value defector accounts according to Cold War logics. They express a great deal of skepticism about the ethics of relying on refugee testimony. However, journalists' views of defector sources vary. Korean language ability makes it easier for journalists to build rapport with refugee sources and journalists who value the "human angle" of North Korean stories tend

to privilege talking to defectors for information.

In this chapter, I argue that journalists rely on professional norms and Cold War ideology to create a hierarchy of sources. Routinization and the norms that govern journalism as a field appear to influence the degree of trust journalists place on certain sources but are sometimes at odds with the Cold War logic journalists use to make sense of information about North Korea. At the top, journalists privilege U.S. official sources and Anglophone news outlets, both of which they appear to implicitly trust. Journalists place North Korean defector sources and South Korean news media at the bottom, dismissing both unethical. The tension between professional norms and Cold War ideology are visible in journalists' discussion of North and South Korean official sources. Journalists are torn between their instinct to trust official sources, which aligns with the norms of the profession, and the impulse to be skeptical of the Other. This first section discusses this tension at length.

1. Government Officials

It is a well-documented phenomenon that journalists rely heavily on official sources in their reporting (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 2006; Hallin, 1986; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978). The journalists I spoke with broadly adhered to this professional norm, privileging official sources over other types of sources. As Tuchman (1978) notes, relying on people in power to serve as news sources "bears consequences for the information news workers uncover" (p. 81). When journalists rely on government officials to explain what is happening, these officials become "primary definers" (Hall et al., 1978) that influence news media narratives. Official sources allow journalists to keep the façade of "neutral" and "objective" coverage, because the source, not the journalist, is offering this "information." In Anglophone journalism about North Korea, official sources usually originate from one of three countries: the U.S., South Korea, and

North Korea. Hallin (1984) argues that journalism that strives to be "neutral," but relies on government officials often ends up with "the version of reality government officials would like to present to the public" (p. 20). Exploring how journalists privilege one country's official sources over another furthers our understanding of which country's narratives come to define Anglophone media's depictions of North Korea.

1.1 U.S. Official Sources

Talking to foreign journalists about their views on U.S. officials made it clear that although journalists had some misgivings about U.S. official sources, such as this Asia-based CNN staff member's dismissal of quotes from a "White House official or Security Council official just mouthing off about North Korea" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019), there was an overall sense of trust in the various agencies of the U.S. government. Several journalists mentioned that U.S. officials were often not able to talk openly about sensitive issues, and had to be quoted anonymously, but did not seem to question the credibility of anonymous U.S. officials. In fact, despite journalists' ambivalence toward eyewitnessing themselves, there was a tendency to value the eyewitness accounts of government officials. Independent journalist Tim Shorrock, who has long been affiliated with *The Nation*, talked about finding that current and former U.S. officials that had gone to Pyongyang and taken part in negotiations with North Korea offered interesting insights (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

Although journalists were often aware of the "Washington consensus" and that U.S. officials talked about North Korea in terms of U.S. interests and perspectives, they relied on U.S. officials' accounts to verify information. Matthew Pennington, former AP correspondent based in Washington, D.C., talked about using U.S. officials to cross-check information from experts or satellite images (Personal comm, Jan. 2020). Pushback on U.S. official sources came from UK

journalists, who expressed distrust toward the U.S. government. Interestingly, most journalists I spoke with did not extensively discuss U.S. official sources. Since U.S. officials are the purview of foreign correspondents and journalists in Washington, D.C., and local journalists use their language skills and connections to build South Korean sources, this is a likely explanation for the absence of extensive discussion about U.S. official sources.

1.2 South Korean Official Sources

Contrary to the limited discussion about U.S. official sources, journalists spoke extensively about South Korean officials. In my conversations with journalists, two themes emerged: (1) the difficulty Anglophone organizations face accessing South Korean officials and (2) the influence of language skills and cultural disconnects on foreign correspondents' ability to build South Korean sources. Much like journalists' use of information scarcity to justify problematic narratives and using access constraints to explain their ambivalence toward eyewitnessing, foreign correspondents' views on South Korean sources appeared to be influenced by their constraints. Journalists, particularly foreign correspondents, expressed ambivalence toward South Korean sources.

1.2.1 Access

Both foreign correspondents and local journalists expressed frustration about the disparity between foreign and domestic outlets in their levels of access to South Korean official sources. A former Seoul-based foreign correspondent (Personal comm, June 2017) likened the institutionalized South Korean system for interacting with foreign media organizations to the Japanese *kisha* club, or press club, system, which provides select domestic reporters the physical infrastructure to report from inside government buildings (Borowiec, 2016). Differences in access, such as foreign news media's inability to attend "back briefings" where government

agencies supply journalists with important background information, drove organizations like the Seoul Foreign Correspondent's Club to advocate for foreign media pool membership and fighting to have the same number of spots as local South Korean media do in the press pool (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). An ethnically Korean journalist suggested it was important to make friends with reporters working at local South Korean media outlets and in the various government ministries, because "there's definitely discrimination between local media and foreign media" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). In fact, an Asia-based CNN staff member suggested that "the type of officials who have contacts with Western media organizations aren't necessary very influential" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

However, these differences were not just institutional, but also related to the interpersonal interactions that journalists and government officials shared. Former BBC journalist Subin Kim mentioned that South Korean officials were reticent to go on-the-record about North Korea, but this hesitancy was heightened with the foreign press and that he rarely heard of officials talking candidly with Anglophone news media (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Interestingly, local journalists were more attuned to the nuances of interpersonal interactions between foreign correspondents and South Korean officials. A local South Korean journalist suggested that a journalist's job was living the "source-building life," mentioning she had invested a significant amount of time and resources into cultivating relationships with sources over drinks (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Toward the end of our conversation, I watched as her investment paid off. When the reporter received a phone call from her foreign correspondent colleague saying that North Korea had test fired two rockets, she was able to quickly jump on a call with a South Korean official confirming the report, which her colleague had found out about through a wire report from their Japanese bureau. Observing the process of collaborating on the information

gathering process illustrated the vital role local journalists play in the newsgathering process. Reaching out to sources for confirmation on short notice is possible because of the journalist's fluency in Korean and her nuanced awareness of cultural norms. When she spoke with her source, it was clear they had a friendly relationship, but she still used honorifics to address him. These nuanced cultural practices play a significant role in local journalists' trust-based relationships with their sources.

Contrasting the local journalist's description of getting drinks with her sources with a foreign correspondent's account of getting drinks with South Korean officials clarified the differences. The foreign correspondent characterized his own encounter as "a very formal experience" where he went out for drinks with two South Korean government officials, but one government official drank very little and took notes (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). However, when I asked the correspondent how he felt about access, he said he had no complaints. The varying levels of access afforded to foreign correspondents and local journalists is not just a problem of the system but illustrates the important ways cultural and linguistic proximity factor into building rapport and gaining access to sources.

Another example of cultural disconnection is how journalists interpret interactions with their sources. Long-time freelance journalist Jason Strother talked about experiencing "a culture of shame" in South Korea, which he said led to people declining to interview with him because they are "more self-conscious here about how they are depicted publicly" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Reuters journalist Shane Hahm, who is ethnically Korean, expressed a similar sentiment. During our conversation, he brought up the "struggle [of] being raised in a Western country but working here in Asia." Hahm talked about how it was "very hard to get people on the record to speak candidly or not anonymously from their position," particularly sources from South Korean

government agencies whose public statements were “very scripted.” He noted that this was “not a criticism, it’s more there’s a cultural aspect to it” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). In this case, both foreign correspondent and ethnically Korean journalist expressed the same sentiments. Unlike the earlier example, where the ethnically Korean journalist was born and raised in South Korea, Hahm is ethnically Korean, but was born and raised in Canada. Even though he can speak Korean and lives in Seoul, his experience of being Korean differs from a “local” journalist’s experience. Comparing these two examples illustrates the vast differences among ethnically Korean journalists covering North Korea. In the second example, Strother and Hahm were trying to make sense of difficulties with access through the lens of Anglo-Western journalism norms. By reducing the problem of access to “cultural difference,” their notion of what journalism looked like adhered to the normative view of what Anglo-Western journalistic practice should look like.

1.2.2 Language

For foreign journalists, the ability to develop South Korean sources is contingent on language ability, which narrows the set of available sources. Wang Son-Taek, former diplomatic correspondent for South Korea’s YTN news network and contributor to NK News, suggested that when you cannot speak Korean, your go-to sources are often government officials, because people with in-depth knowledge about North Korea often cannot speak English well (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). One former foreign correspondent pointed out “there’s a small cohort of people if you don’t speak Korean,” while ethnically Korean journalists who have Korean language abilities are able to conduct interviews in Korean and write stories in English (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Even with conversational Korean skills, North Korea Tech’s Martyn Williams noted that foreign correspondents often need to conduct interviews in English or with a

translator. He conjectured that when a journalist is on deadline and their assistant has gone home, "you can't be messing around with someone that doesn't speak English. You're like, I need someone on the phone"" (Personal comm, Nov. 2017). However, conversations about language proficiency, particularly among ethnically Korean journalists, were often vague. One aspect missing from these conversations was a discussion of the range in language ability, from "native" or fluent Korean speakers to conversational Korean speakers who still used a translator for interviews. The unspoken assumption was that ethnically Korean journalists could speak Korean, although there was some differentiation between whether they learned Korean in a formal language school setting versus speaking Korean at home.

Again, the subtle conflation of ethnicity with language ability speaks to the complex ways that identity matters for journalists. As the makeup of the staff journalists that comprise the foreign press in Seoul changes to include more ethnically Korean journalists, it is imperative that journalists and journalism scholars grapple with the unique challenges of liminality in foreign news bureaus. This is especially true since local journalists may be able to establish closer relationships with official sources than an ethnically Korean journalist who is viewed as an outsider. Using ethnoracial logic (Abad, 2019) to assume a relationship between one's race or ethnicity and the knowledge they possess, complicates the role ethnically Korean journalists who do not identify with "local" culture play in Seoul's Anglophone newsrooms.

In addition, language ability cannot be conflated with cultural understanding. An ethnically Korean journalist pointed to South Korean government officials' foreign news media briefings as a chance for officials to "brag that their English is good" and perform for the cameras (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). A former foreign correspondent shared a similar perspective, suggesting that South Korean government spokespeople tasked with briefing the

foreign press had good English-speaking skills but were "very bad at explaining themselves in a way that Western people will appreciate," such as framing a story in terms of justice and morality, instead of markets and the economy (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Despite their English language abilities, the foreign correspondent thought that government spokespeople who had not spent time in Anglophone countries were not able to translate the value of what they were talking about for foreign audiences. This loss of understanding between foreign correspondents and South Korean spokespeople illuminates the audience-driven nature of news media, which leads news organizations to privilege the views of their own national governments in coverage of North Korea. When South Korean government officials present information in a way that is not interesting to foreign reporters and their audiences, correspondents must do the work of "translating" the information's value to Anglo-Western news audiences. Foreign correspondents' assumptions that South Korean values are vastly different from their audiences' values contribute to the tension between foreign correspondents and South Korean officials.

The assumption that South Korean and Anglo-Western values differ is at the heart of journalists' ambivalence toward South Korean government officials. In the next section, I address the outright distrust that journalists display toward North Korean official sources.

1.3 North Korean Official Sources

Unlike other official sources, journalists expressed a need to scrutinize the value of North Korean official sources. An Asia-based CNN staff member suggested that reporting on North Korea "really requires a certain degree of expertise and experience" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). This was especially true for North Korean official statements, which all journalists – including this ethnically Korean journalist – approached from "the baseline that it is unverifiable, even official announcements are not verifiable" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The Asia-based CNN

staff member characterized the difficulty of getting comment from North Korean officials as "a constant sending of faxes into nowhere" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Another foreign correspondent juxtaposed the Taliban's availability "any time of day" on WhatsApp with sending messages to the North Korean embassy in Beijing or their UN delegation in New York as a formality, or "basically to say that we tried" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). The correspondent's juxtaposition of North Korean officials to a group that the U.S. has overtly Othered and villainized illustrates the degree to which journalists working for Anglophone news outlets distrust North Korean official sources.

Some journalists, particularly those who had traveled to North Korea, pushed back on the impossibility of access to North Korean officials. One foreign correspondent explained that North Korean officials at the UN or in China were more accessible, but it was the journalist's geographic location in South Korea that limited their interactions with North Korean officials (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). For instance, AP correspondent and editor Christopher Bodeen in Beijing talked about meeting with Beijing-based KCNA staff for monthly chats. In addition, Bodeen's proximity to the North Korean embassy in Beijing gave him the opportunity to observe and write news pieces in the early 2000s about "near weekly" defections by North Korean asylum seekers in Beijing (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Similarly, Anna Fifield relayed her experience of continuously going to see the North Korean diplomats at the UN whenever she traveled to New York. She would text the North Korean diplomats questions via WhatsApp, even if they did not respond. This paid off in 2018 when, South Korean officials went to the White House to deliver the message that North Korea was willing to talk to Trump. Fifield texted the North Korean ambassador to the UN, asking for a comment, and he sent her a statement. Although it took patience and persistence, she explained that for 36 hours, she had an exclusive

North Korean confirmation that the Kim regime wanted to talk to Trump. She acknowledged that this "took a lot of effort to get that one thing, after talking to them and getting nothing. And when they were ready to talk, it worked" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

However, other journalists, such as freelance journalist Bruce Harrison expressed "a lack of trying mainly because, for me, it was never worth the endeavor" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). For him, it made more sense to "pad" his reports "with experts and voices of the people here in South Korea" instead of reaching out to officials that would not respond (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Instead, journalists like Harrison relied on North Korean state media to convey the North Korean side of things. This heavy reliance on North Korean state media as a source often meant that coverage among news outlets was, as one foreign correspondent put it, "similar because we all have the same sources of information we refer to. So, if the Rodong Sinmun says something, then we'll all run it, because it's the only thing that's been said. Or KCNA is reporting it and we all have the same quotes" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The tendency to fill what journalists perceived to be an information vacuum with expert opinion and news media reports meant that information about North Korea was frequently recycled and circulated repeatedly.

Some foreign correspondents expressed that there was plenty of primary source materials supplying authoritative information about North Korea (Personal comm, Oct. 2019) and that North Korean state media was an important source of information, since "North Korea is remarkably candid about their plans" (Personal comm, Nov. 2018). One ethnically Korean journalist likened the reliance on North Korean state media to the same way journalists rely on White House or State Department press releases, questioning whether it was "really different from how other press rooms [are] run" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). However, lack of comment by North Korean officials appeared to leave a vacuum that journalists felt the need to fill. Both

foreign and ethnically Korean journalists felt that the lack of pushback from North Korea created an environment where reporters may be tempted to cover something, even if the information could not be verified.

Journalists expressed distrust of “a very unreliable official media in North Korea” (Gale, personal comm, Oct. 2019). John Power, formerly a journalist in Seoul, talked about the importance of keeping in mind that the North Korean government’s statements are “exclusively filtered through the lens of party control and the Kim Jong-un personality cult” and “exists purely to uphold a particular ideology” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). This contradiction, between wanting access to North Korean official sources and distrusting North Korean state media and officials, is like the ambivalence journalists expressed about eyewitnessing in North Korea. While journalists wanted to talk to North Korean officials, they also believed that North Korea deliberately tried to stay in the spotlight by making bold statements and engaging in provocations (Personal comm, June 2017). Imagining North Korea through the Cold War lens of “the nuclear enemy” seemed to inform how journalists thought about North Korean state media.

However, several journalists believed that North Korean state media not only gave voice to a belligerent enemy but was deployed strategically. North Korea Tech’s Martyn Williams observed that when the North Korean regime releases a statement, they make sure to release an English version because they are aware that foreign news outlets are monitoring North Korean state media and “they know exactly how it’s going to get reported” (Personal comm, Nov. 2017). A foreign correspondent echoed the sentiment that the North Korean government was strategic in their engagement with media, offering interviews to CNN, which he described as the “go to when [the North Koreans] want to reach American audiences” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). AP correspondent and editor Christopher Bodeen in Beijing suggested that allowing Western news

outlets to set up bureaus in Pyongyang may be a result of the North Korean government's realization that "some publicity is better than none" and hoping strategic engagement could lead to Anglophone journalists taking less "cheap shots" at North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

More recently, scholarly studies of North Korea have argued that Kim Jong Un is a "celebrity dictator" (Zeglen, 2017) who uses strategic public relations campaigns to disseminate a "charm offensive" aimed at legitimizing his leadership by using selfies and other entertaining, conciliatory gestures (Sonnenvend, 2019; Sonnenvend & Kim, 2020). NPR's correspondent in Seoul, Anthony Kuhn, noted a shift in press strategy among North Korean officials. During Kuhn's time as a correspondent in Beijing, he observed that North Korean press conferences used to be held "the old school way," where you were called on the phone and summoned to the North Korean embassy. He recalled the ambassador would hand reporters a business card with only his name on it, then read from a script, taking no questions. Kuhn pointed to more recent instances of North Korean officials talking to the foreign press in Stockholm and Hanoi as a "modest beginning" to shifting the way North Korean government officials interact with outside media (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Journalists described designing their own systems for interpreting North Korean state media to provide "the proper level of skepticism" for what a reporter would consider a "ridiculous" statement (Power, personal comm, Oct. 2019). Former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee suggested "it takes years to understand how to read KCNA accurately," particularly how to read through propaganda (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Journalists talked about a hierarchy among North Korean officials and ministries that helped them determine the varying levels of significance of each North Korean statement, such as weighting a statement or speech attributed to Kim Jong-Un more than a KCNA editorial (Personal com, Oct. 2019; Personal comm, Nov.

2019; Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Interpreting North Korean state media is often thought of as the realm of experts. However, journalists talked about interpreting what North Korean officials think so that their audiences could see “a logic” to North Korea (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Independent journalist Tim Shorrock pointed out the importance of interpreting North Korean statements, because without this interpretation, they can “sound off the wall” (Personal comm, Jan. 2020).

This interpretative work is complicated by the Cold War ideology underlying Anglophone news coverage of North Korea. Journalists are able to interpret and “believe North Korean media when it suits us and we don’t believe them when it suits us” (Williams, personal comm, Nov. 2017). An expert who works with media organizations described taking the president of an American broadcasting network to North Korea. The expert went on to describe how “astounded” the network president was after seeing that North Korea was different than what he expected, but also expressed being “afraid if they started doing more reporting on it, though, that they would be accused of being pro-North Korean, which is what happened to AP when they opened up” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Several of the journalists I spoke with expressed the desire not to function as PR or a mouthpiece for the North Korean regime, illustrating the tension between gaining access and the watchdog function of journalism (Personal comm, June 2017). Journalists who expressed a strong orientation to keeping government accountable were less likely to engage with the more “human” aspects of covering North Korea. One foreign correspondent in Seoul mentioned trying not to call North Korea’s actions “provocations” because North Koreans did not like the term, but eventually concluded that “you have to call a spade a spade at some point” (Personal comm, June 2017). According to this correspondent, the idea that a journalist would legitimize the North Korean government’s

interpretation of events was not in the realm of possibility.

As journalists create news that is "attuned to specific understandings of social reality" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 216), they do so from a particular vantage point. Even when North Korea changed its behavior, such as holding a live press conference during the Hanoi Summit, journalists continued to rely on the Cold War framework to interpret information about the country. Adopting this adversarial stance meant that journalists approached every new development with skepticism, asking how the latest information fit into existing narratives. As this next section argues, relying on other news media outlets as sources similarly perpetuates the existing narratives about North Korea. By valuing Anglophone news media, which shares the same Cold War mentality, and dismissing South Korean news media as unethical, journalists continue to privilege sources that align with existing narratives.

2. News Media

In our conversations, journalists often talked about relying on other Anglophone and South Korean news media outlets as sources of information for their stories. Freelance journalist Bruce Harrison mentioned that when a North Korea-related rumor appears, citing the first media outlet to report on a rumor is quicker than calling sources and "puts the onus on someone else" to verify what is happening in the country (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Entman & Usher (2018) suggest that, even as digital technology diminishes their power, legacy media continue to occupy "the second rung of the [cascading activation model] below elites" (p. 304). Audiences and other journalists still pay attention to legacy media outlets, who may watch what legacy media outlets report on to keep up with the competition. In the North Korea context, journalists often described rely on other reporters for story ideas and using wire services for breaking news information about North Korea. As one foreign correspondent noted, the Internet and social media platforms

have created “massively more pressure to react quickly” and to “come up with original stuff, because in the old days of the newspaper, we could all be writing the same story and you wouldn’t know” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The correspondent suggested that platforms like Twitter contribute to this need to keep up with “competitor-colleagues” (Tunstall, 1971) and increase journalists’ reliance on other media outlets as sources. Journalists also mentioned hesitating to publish stories about North Korea that no one else has published, pointing to a “snowball effect” that often occurs because media outlets tend to pick up stories that other media outlets have already published.

2.1 Anglophone Journalism

Journalists described daily newsgathering routines, such as scrolling through Twitter to see what other journalists covering the region were writing about North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019) or chasing stories that editors would encourage them to pursue based on other news outlets’ coverage about North Korea.

> “It’s a snowball effect sometimes. So, if a couple pick it up, maybe more will feel compelled to have that coverage as well. Sometimes others will see that and say, “That’s sensational garbage, and we’re not going to run with it.” Yeah, media influences media a lot of the time. Constantly you get, “Did you see this and this?”” (Harrison, personal comm, Feb. 2020).

At the heart of disagreements between editors’ and reporters’ assessment of information about North Korea is the pressure to report on existing news media stories. According to an Asia-based CNN staff member, when an international news organization’s headquarters sees other news organizations reporting a story, even if they are “outlandish” and it would be “irresponsible to report them,” the editors still reach out to the regional headquarters to ask them to report on it (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Harrison described this kind of “pack journalism” as a routine part of the news making process (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Journalists watch what their colleagues

and other media outlets are reporting on to inform their own stories, which can be problematic when the various news outlets do not share the same standards for sourcing. One ethnically Korean journalist suggested that this approach can lead to journalists having as much to do with the spread of misinformation about North Korea as social media platforms, such as Twitter (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Since Anglophone media outlets can have far-reaching influence, picking up unsubstantiated information – even if they caveat it – can lead to widespread dissemination. Take, for example, CNN's report in April 2020 about Kim Jong-Un's health. After CNN released its coverage, other reputable media outlets reported on the topic, citing CNN as their original source of information. When a respected media outlet picks up a story, then other news organizations can report on it too, without having to take responsibility if the story turns out to be wrong. It is especially difficult to avoid relying on wire services as sources of information, which makes them "dangerous" because of the critical role they play in breaking news (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

According to freelance journalist Bruce Harrison, a similar dynamic occurs between freelancers and their clients, who might see another news organization's report and request the same story. But when Harrison pushes back and points out there might be a political motive behind the report, he notices that the client usually backs off (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). These conflicting views from editors or clients that are not in Seoul and journalists who have more experience "reading" North Korea, reflect a tension in the decision-making process influenced by what the news organization value more – speed or accuracy. One ethnically Korean journalist talked about criticism toward their foreign news organization for being slow, but that "our policy is accuracy over speediness" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Another ethnically Korean journalist described a time when "our editors started to get on our ass. They were like, "Come on, guys.

CNN is writing it. What are you guys doing? Why can't we confirm this?" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The journalist said they told the editor that they might be able to confirm it within a month, but they would have to talk to multiple sources and take the time to wait and see what happened. Similarly, McLaughlin (2016) found that in reporting on the Bosnian War, stories about atrocity "were reported with scant regard for their veracity – no checking, no official confirmations or denials, just the rush to instant judgment" (p. 46).

Citing other news media as a source allow journalists to report on rumors or unverified information without having outside corroboration. As an Asia-based CNN staff member said, you can do a "reverse viral version of the story, where you say you know this is bullshit" but report on it anyway (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). However, one ethnically Korean journalist suggested that it is a journalist's job not only to keep governments in check, but "they also have to keep other media in check" (Personal comm., Nov. 2019). Journalists talked about the need for media ethics and accountability among South Korean news outlets, referring to single-sourced stories and reliance on defector accounts as problematic.

2.2 South Korean Journalism

A large part of the discussion about what kind of second-hand information to trust, and which media outlets are deemed trustworthy, centers around what journalists working for foreign news organizations think about local South Korean news media's reporting on North Korea. One foreign correspondent suggested that even though they believe South Korean news outlets lack credibility in their reporting on North Korea, other journalists seemed to "over-rely" on local South Korean media as sources for their own reporting (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). An Asia-based CNN staff member suggested that the partisan orientation of South Korean news media was cause for mistrust (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). What these critiques of South Korean news

media ignore are the multiple instances of foreign correspondents and Anglophone media getting it wrong, too. Even among ethnically Korean journalists, the degree to which a reporter espouses an Anglo-Western set of journalism ethics, and how much emphasis they put on their identity as a journalist versus their identity as a Korean, can guide their view of South Korean news media. However, journalists' allegiance to an Anglo-Western set of journalism ethics does not supersede the fact that journalism is still a business, competing with other news outlets. Editors outside of Seoul may care less about how they view South Korean journalism ethics and more about making sure their news organization does not miss out on click-worthy news.

This disparaging attitude toward South Korean media, which both foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists held, reflect an institutional-level insistence that Anglo-Western journalism ethics are superior. By casting blame on South Korean media for reporting on rumors and getting facts wrong, journalists working for Anglophone organizations – who have likely used South Korean news media outlets as sources – absolve themselves of responsibility for spreading rumors. Several journalists referred to South Korean journalism ethics as problematic, claiming that South Korean media was untrustworthy because it was unethical. Freelance journalist Strother argued that "journalistic values are really different between Korea and the United States." He mentioned several South Korean outlets, suggesting that "the shit they put out is propaganda" and calling Arirang TV "a level below KCNA." Even *The Hankyoreh*, which he claimed, "does good reporting," also has an agenda that suggests "we should apologize for North Korea and how Japan will be wrong forever" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

The overwhelming sentiment among journalists working for foreign news organizations was caution in using South Korean media as sources, unless they could independently

corroborate with their own sources, such as diplomatic or intelligence sources (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). A foreign correspondent in Seoul mentioned that there are “different standards for reporting in different countries,” pointing out that certain South Korean media outlets have a “long history” of getting stories about North Korea wrong (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). An Asia-based foreign correspondent called the South Korean media “fast and loose with the facts,” talking about how using South Korean media reports required caveats or sometimes, should be excluded as a source for other news outlets altogether (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Journalists often attribute the problem of South Korean media’s reliability to single-source reporting (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Journalists’ – both foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists’ – differentiation between South Korean and Anglophone media standards illustrated the strength of their allegiance to a set of Anglo-Western journalism values. Jean Lee, former AP Koreas bureau chief, described how “many of the stories published in South Korean media turned out to be wrong,” but that foreign media still picked up those stories and published them. Along with the lack of access to North Korea, Lee claimed that a “lack of journalistic ethics in South Korea” was contributing to the inaccuracies in reporting on North Korea (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Interestingly, some of the ethnically Korean journalists critiquing South Korean news media previously worked for similar local news organizations. A local South Korean journalist who previously worked for South Korean news media and moved over to an Anglophone news outlet talked about how, in South Korea, “not many news organizations have a good fact-checking system. They have a very tight deadline. Because they can’t really afford that.” She goes on to juxtapose this assessment of South Korean media ethics by stating that “organizations like [my current employer], we are very much cautious” (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). In this instance,

espousing Anglo-Western journalism values also coincides with an internalized Orientalism that allows even those from postcolonial contexts to act as colonizers themselves (Alahmed, 2020).

As the demographics of Anglophone newsrooms in Seoul change to incorporate more ethnically Korean journalists, including local journalists who transition from local newsrooms to Anglophone news organizations, the tensions between a universalizing Anglo-Western view of journalism and the devaluing of South Korean journalism ethics should be further examined. Journalists moving from South Korean news outlets to Anglophone news organizations cannot simply dismiss all their prior journalistic practice and knowledge gained on-the-job. During my conversation with former D.C.-based AP correspondent Matthew Pennington, he suggested that "I wouldn't pick up some report from the South Korean news outlets, without getting the opinion of my colleagues in Seoul" (Personal comm, Jan 2020). This becomes complex, as journalists located in Seoul – and even ethnically Korean journalists – do not always take a different perspective from their colleagues located elsewhere.

However, some ethnically Korean journalists do express a different level of skepticism about South Korean news media. Although an uncommon opinion among journalists I spoke with, one ethnically Korean journalist told me, "I'm not one of those people who think that South Korean news coverage is quite lacking or they don't do enough fact checking because I do respect the work *Chosun* does" (Personal comm, Nov 2019). He pointed out that there were still instances where rumors were never disproven. Another ethnically Korean journalist claimed that South Korean news outlets reports on North Korea rely on sources "familiar with the matter" and that "they don't take it out of their ass" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Although both ethnically Korean journalists had spent substantial time abroad, they did not engage in the same Othering of South Korean news media as their colleagues. Chadha & Koliska (2016) argue in their study of

regional television newsrooms in India that a there is no universal occupational ideology for journalists that can be applied evenly to every context.

In the same vein, journalists' evaluations of refugee/defector sources should be made in a specific cultural context, not a vacuum. This next section examines how foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists evaluate refugee or defectors as eyewitness sources.

3. Refugee/Defectors

Although there are several types of eyewitness sources such as diplomats, government officials, businesspeople, tour companies, NGO workers, students, and sometimes even North Korean citizens, this section focuses on how journalists talk about defectors/refugees[2] as eyewitness sources. As Alastair Gale, former Seoul bureau chief of the *Wall Street Journal* suggested, defectors have "the most recent direct knowledge of what's happening in North Korea" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019) and they can provide insight that journalists cannot gain from eyewitnessing. North Korea Tech's Martyn Williams argues this is because "even a journalist that has visited North Korea 50 times doesn't have the same experience as a defector that lived there for 20 years" (Personal comm, Nov. 2017).

Just as cultural and linguistic proximity matters for journalists' eyewitnessing, the same is true for cultivating defector sources. Journalists described forging relationships with defectors by reaching out to NGOs, missionaries, and other people helping North Koreans escape. One ethnically Korean journalist characterized finding defectors who are willing to function as

[2] The use of the term "defector" is loaded with meaning. Kim (2012) argues that the terminology used to describe North Koreans who now reside in the South as "defectors," "refugees" or "economic migrants," tells us how North Koreans are defined in relation to the project of South Korean ethnic identity. This is fraught for the North Koreans who leave as well, whose identities can fluctuate between the terms (Chung, 2008). This was also apparent in some of my conversations with journalists; some chose to use the term "defector," but others talked about North Koreans who left the country as "refugees." I chose to use the term "defector" because it has the most political significance, particularly when used to describe a former high-ranking official from North Korea or a former North Korean who is invested in a specific cause, such as an NGO, in South Korea. This is important in thinking about the kinds of sources journalists seek out, how they find those sources, and which formerly North Korean sources they value.

sources for journalists as a "long-term process" of forming friendships with individual defectors as well as "developing a relationship with the community itself" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Another ethnically Korean journalist described a friendship that she had been developing with a defector source since 2009, noting that she can ask this source about North Korea-related matters to determine if something is "bullshit" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). North Korea Tech's Martyn Williams conjectured that foreign correspondents may not have the same kinds of defector contacts that South Korean journalists do "because they're not South Korean and they haven't been doing it for years" (Personal comm, Nov. 2017). One ethnically Korean journalist said that getting to know defectors means "you have to go through people you already know," which is difficult for journalists who do not have existing relationships and connections with defector organizations or members of the defector community (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Since North Korean defectors often cannot speak English, foreign correspondents that do not have Korean language abilities face difficulty in reaching out to the community. According to an ethnically Korean journalist, "I think it helps if you speak Korean, especially when you're trying to talk to defectors" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). In a similar vein, one foreign correspondent described working closely with their South Korean colleagues on stories involving defectors because of the language barrier (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). However, another foreign correspondent described how social media platforms provided a way to ease into conversations with defector sources, who may feel more comfortable writing in English than speaking the language (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Despite the effort involved in cultivating these relationships, journalists also noted limitations to using defectors as sources. One foreign correspondent mentioned that talking to someone who had left North Korea several years ago was problematic, because "even two or

three years might be different enough that it skews things" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Unless the defector had been a high-ranking official in the North Korean regime, one ethnically Korean journalist suggested their knowledge may be limited. She pointed out that news outlets often want journalists to ask defectors their opinion on the latest missile launch. However, this raises two important points: 1) information about North Korea's missile program is outside the scope of most defectors' knowledge and 2) despite being skeptical of defector accounts, journalists often insist on using them because they provide an element of sensation (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

The largest issue that plagued journalists was the veracity of these eyewitness accounts. Zelizer (2007) describes how "the eyewitnessing provided by private citizens has been critiqued for shortcomings that have always plagued eyewitnessing, but without the sanctioning provided by conventional journalism to contextualize and mitigate those same shortcomings" (p. 423). Cases like Shin Dong-hyuk, whose story about escaping from a North Korean prison camp turned out to be partly false, sow doubt in peoples' minds about defector accounts. There are documented problems associated with using eyewitness accounts from the Soviet era (Bergman, 1989), the Iraq War (Thomas, Wolffe & Isikoff, 2003; Warrick, 2006), and North Korean defectors (Song & Denney, 2019). Song & Denney (2019) suggest that interviewing defectors can bring up the challenge of selection bias, unequal power dynamics, monetary incentives, language barriers, and of course, the issue of verification.

Because of questions about veracity, freelance journalist Jason Strother explained that a defector account "would not be the lynchpin" of any story he produced (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Freelance journalist Bruce Harrison suggested the most outlandish stories about North Korea are often attributed to defector sources, such as reports about Kim Jong-Il traveling with a private toilet so he could make sure foreign governments could not retrieve his feces and test it

for disease (Personal comm, Feb. 2020). Alastair Gale, the former Seoul bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*, attributed the "real tabloid shock stories" to a single anonymous source who is "often a defector who's got a crazy story" or an intelligence official that mentioned something in passing to a journalist over drinks (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). By placing a defector source alongside an intelligence official, Gale suggests that both are highly suspect sources of information that can deceive or get things wrong.

Given the significant role journalists attribute to verification, journalists talked about using defector sources in one of two ways: (1) an ethnically Korean journalist suggested focusing on how refugees are faring now that they were outside of North Korea (Personal comm, Nov. 2019), or (2) other journalists espoused the importance of clarifying what a defector source's contribution would be in coverage. One foreign journalist talked about trying to "position defectors in a place where they've been treated like their opinions are valuable, but not in a way where we're overstating the importance" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Journalists also seemed to believe that defectors "don't have the same relationship with the truth that people from a Western perspective might have" (Strother, personal comm, Dec. 2019). One foreign correspondent claimed it was difficult to trust defector testimony because defectors "were raised in these horrible dictator societies, maybe not all of them are going to be wonderful people" (Personal comm, June 2017). An ethnically Korean journalist mentioned that defectors believe their story may have more value if they are "wilder and more twisted and pretty much [have] more suffering" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). He chalked these instances where defectors were unable to remember details as a product of losing old memories and honest mistakes. However, even if defectors were "misremembering" details, *The Times* Asia editor Richard Lloyd Parry talked about trusting his readers to "have the common sense to know that

what people say isn't necessarily the truth" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). As Reuters journalist Shane Hahm put it, a defector's account is "their story," so "there's nothing really to factcheck per se" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

Similar to journalists' insistence that South Korean journalism did not meet up to Anglo-Western journalism's globalizing set of ethics, journalists evaluated refugees based on their own problematic narratives about North Korea. By assuming that defectors are unfamiliar with the "truth" or that people raised in authoritarian contexts are somehow worse than those in democratic contexts, journalists relied on the tired Cold War framework to demonize defectors as sources. They rely on a universalizing set of Anglo-Western ethics that made "their" relationship to "truth" suspect, while rendering "us" superior. Although Reuters journalist Shane Hahm suggests that defectors' stories can be taken at face value, other journalists argue that defectors are not to be trusted and that they, just like any other North Korean source, must be interrogated. One ethnically Korean journalist suggested that the "threshold for reporting becomes a lot lower for North Korean reporting because we do have to rely quite a lot on hearsay" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

Most journalists agreed that defector accounts should go through the process of triangulation, including corroborating defector's accounts with official sources, experts, or through crosschecking one defector's experience with another. *The Times* Asia editor Richard Lloyd Parry described strategies of determining if defectors could be trusted, such as matching defector testimony up with information coming from non-profit organizations with a presence in North Korea, such as the World Food Programme or asking leading questions that might infer to the defector that life in North Korea is "terrible" and "a living hell" to see how the defector responds. If the defector provides a nuanced view of life in North Korea, such as talking about

the positive aspects of living in North Korea, Parry suggested he would trust their statement more than if “they’re always making it sound as bad as it could possibly be, because you’re giving the impression that’s what you want” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). John Power, a journalist formerly based in Seoul, described a systematic approach he created for evaluating defectors’ accounts. He would ask himself whether the claims were defamatory, had serious ramifications, whether the person had been trustworthy in the past, and if their position would allow them to know this information – and then check it against what he knew about North Korea (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee said that telling defectors she had lived in North Korea meant “they knew that they couldn’t lie to me.” She also made sure to find out what their area of expertise was and became “very targeted in reaching out to sources” (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

Parry also described using a “gut feeling” to determine whether to trust a defector’s account and to start from the assumption that tales of “repression and deprivation in North Korea” were true, because even if the details were not right, the gist of the story was considered to be true (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Stephen Haggard (2015) argues that “the most important point is that the case against North Korea does not rest on the testimony of any one individual, but on the accumulated evidence from a variety of sources, from studies of the famine and survey of refugees we and others have done, to satellite imagery, to smuggled video footage, to the overwhelming weight of the refugee testimony on offer, now running to hundreds who had some experience with the penal system.” In other words, defector testimonies taken together may tell us something that one or two defector eyewitness accounts may not. Journalists often do not have time to interview hundreds of defectors/refugees, and they may have limited access to defector communities because of their language skills. In addition, they must parse out whether

defectors associated with an NGO have a specific agenda or religious, political, or ideological affiliation that informs what they say. This is an arduous task that requires time, context, and nuance.

According to an ethnically Korean journalist, defectors that end up speaking to foreign news media "tend to be defectors who are activists themselves, who are seeking to change the world, are seeking to bring change to North Korea" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Since these defectors have a message they want to amplify, they are more willing to go on the record. The journalist conjectured those former high-level North Korean officials were more willing to go on the record because they are protected by the South Korean government and because they want publicity (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). One ethnically Korean journalist talked about how even though they valued "the human story," defectors often have political motivations that may be related to the trauma of defecting but may also be related to understanding how to use the media for gain (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). A foreign correspondent based in Asia echoed those sentiments, pointing out that "there's a whole kind of defector subculture when it comes to politics and their messaging. Some people are very straightforward with you, but other people do have an agenda" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The correspondent conjectured this may be related to their "re-education" at Hanawon, a South Korean facility where North Korean defectors go before resettling in South Korea. Hanawon is typically the last step in their escape journey, but also a place where the South Korean government provides North Korean refugees with practical information about how to live in South Korean society, alongside lessons that reframe the history of the Korean peninsula they may have learned in the North.

Since defectors, particularly the vocal ones, do have an agenda and want to bring more attention to their causes, one ethnically Korean journalist described how "being a Korean [that]

is working for a Western newspaper" can be an advantage (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). The journalist described forging relationships with defectors and learning that some defectors were not interested in speaking to South Korean media because they believed local media sensationalized their stories and pointed to bad experiences with South Korean reporters publishing their names without permission (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). In addition, some defectors want to disseminate their message to a wider audience, which foreign news organizations provided them.

However, other journalists emphasized that defectors are "victims of a dictatorship" and "very vulnerable" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). *The New York Times*' Seoul bureau chief Choe Sang-Hun described defectors as a unique minority with a unique political point of view (Personal comm, June 2017). As a vulnerable population, journalists talked about the need to protect defectors' identities to preserve their relationship with, and the lives of, people still in North Korea. This meant that some defectors chose to remain anonymous, trying to live obscure lives in South Korea without being "outed" as North Korean (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Keeping sources anonymous for safety reasons is a respected journalism practice, even among news outlets that do not rely on anonymous sources. However, an ethnically Korean journalist suggested that this desire to protect defector sources can also lead journalists to make decisions that "make the country very mysterious in many ways" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). She mentioned an example of omitting information about the general route refugees take to seek asylum after leaving North Korea, even when the information had already been publicly circulated. By obscuring publicly available information, journalists albeit well-intentioned attempt to protect defectors' identities reified the existing narrative of scarce information.

Another issue journalists frequently mentioned with defector sources was the ethics of

paying for interviews. Since paying defectors is not an accepted practice for most mainstream Anglophone news outlets, defectors are not compensated for their time. As freelance journalist Jason Strother points out, some defectors are motivated to get publicity and books deals, pointing to “celebrity defectors” that are “very nice girls and they got themselves all plastic surgeried up and whatever else to do their TikToks and all that” (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Strother’s gendered problematization of defectors that become or seek fame implies that defectors should stay in their role instead of asserting agency.

At the same time, journalists ask defectors to spend a substantial amount of time talking to them, even though there are no tangible benefits for the defector. Some local journalists mentioned buying defectors a meal (Personal comm, Nov. 2019); another talked about bringing a small gift that cost less than $20, such as a box of juice, but thought of this more as a “cultural thing” they would do when visiting a friend’s house, rather than as compensation (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). One journalist suggested it was “a little controversial to say that we ask for their time, but there is no compensation,” with the promise that “your story is going to change the world eventually” (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Local journalists viewed the issue of compensation differently from prevailing view among Anglo-Western journalism that any compensation is unethical and would automatically provide biased or skewed information.

However, this ethical dilemma of asking for uncompensated time from refugees, who are considered a protected population, is worsened by South Korean and Japanese news media organizations that do pay for defector interviews. According to one South Korean journalist, many defectors choose to give their first solo interview to Japanese media because they get paid (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). However, journalists frequently expressed the view that paying defectors may mean they tell you want you want to hear (Personal comm, June 2017). Richard

Lloyd Parry, Asia editor at *The Times*, described the "marketplace of information" that can lead defectors to want to tell journalists the stories they hope to hear. However, Parry also talked about how paying for defector interviews could be done as long as there is a good reason for paying them and the money was paid through an official bank transfer with a receipt. Parry described how transparency about the payments allowed "people can form their own opinions about whether what he says is to be valuable or not" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). He described scheduling an interview with Thae Yong-ho, a high-profile North Korean defector who was formerly North Korea's deputy ambassador to the U.K. Thae requested $500 for the interview, but when Parry asked for his bank account number to make the transfer, Thae declined and requested cash. The interview ended up not happening. These kinds of incidents raise the question of self-selection among defectors who are willing to talk for free, versus the ones that want to do it for pay. It also raises questions about other choices, such as which news outlets defectors trust and what their motivations are for speaking publicly. One foreign correspondent argued that defectors are often "not in really great financial conditions," which is why they ask for money; however, this question of how to balance a defector's status as a vulnerable person with the ethical quandaries raised by paying for an interview suggests that "one of the easiest ways to humanize the story is full of landmines" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019).

Journalists' descriptions of how they value defector sources clarifies the value Anglophone journalism places on privileging powerful sources and valuing knowledge about the North Korean regime. Overall, journalists were more skeptical of defector sources than official sources or other news media outlets, with the exception of Thae Yong-Ho, the former high-ranking North Korean official. As a former North Korean official, defectors like Thae Yong-Ho continue to illustrate the place government officials occupy on the hierarchy of sources,

providing perspectives that align with the dominant news narratives about North Korea and reinforcing the Cold War ideology that undergirds North Korea-related news narratives.

4. Conclusion

Sourcing is an important aspect of the story journalists tell. This evident in journalists' heavy reliance on official sources, which serves to provide a narrative about North Korea that conflates the country with the ruling regime and reinforces their importance as an enemy. Since journalists are interested in news coverage that appeals to their imagined audiences, the relevance of North Korea to Anglophone countries rests on North Korea's nuclear program. Journalists suggest that reporting on North Korea can increase intrigue about the country (Personal comm, Nov. 2019) and may even produce opportunities to cover other topics related to North Korea, that do not have urgent geopolitical significance (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Journalists play an outsized role in gatekeeping information about North Korea because they often do not have extensive first-hand experience with the country and rely solely on secondhand information. The sources they use may determine how journalists, editors, news organizations, and ultimately, their audiences, come to understand North Korea.

Journalistic representations of North Korea are dependent on methods used to determine the veracity of defector testimony, using Cold War frameworks to remain skeptical of any information coming out of the country. Journalists also depend on other legacy media outlets, including wire agencies, international news organizations, and reputable newspapers based in the U.S. and the UK, as sources of information about North Korea. But the quandary of knowing what is going on inside the country is difficult for journalists, who are limited in their ability to travel and talk freely to anyone they see. Relying on the accounts of those who have chosen or were forced to leave North Korea means that journalists are tasked with parsing out what is and

is not true, developing strategies to check defectors' claims. Conversations with journalists provide insight into the hierarchy among sources. Official sources with eyewitness experience are important, whereas defectors' eyewitness experience is not valued as much. The hierarchy of choosing sources with proximity to power remains in place, as journalists need sources that will legitimize the dominant narratives about North Korea.

Stories about these topics require journalists to reach out to official sources or rely on North Korean state media to portray the "North Korean side" of things. The idea that there is scarce information about North Korea is one of the overarching narratives that drives how journalists think about sourcing. There are limitations to the ways journalists covering North Korea can gather information, particularly the lack of opportunities to freely eyewitness and difficulties with accessing North Korean officials. Although this narrative is grounded in truth, it provides a rationale for journalists' choices. Journalists may choose to make cursory attempts to contact North Korean officials, because they usually do not respond. Journalists can also resign themselves to becoming heavily dependent on North Korean state media as one of their only ways of knowing about North Korea, interpreting government messages through the lens of skepticism. As journalists tell it, this distrust of North Korean state media goes beyond the traditional Anglo-American "watchdog" role of the press to a more adversarial role that requires heavy scrutinization and distrust of the North Korean regime. Much like Zeng's (2018) findings that some foreign correspondents in China view themselves as "facilitative change agents" who want to work to further their home government's China policy (p. 1406), journalists covering North Korea are interested in providing U.S. and South Korean government officials' responses to the behavior of North Korean political elites. Although they are not advocating for change, journalists' reliance on narratives that emphasize North Korea as the nuclear enemy, and the

privileged place that U.S. and South Korean government officials hold in the hierarchy of sources, continually reinforce the status quo and emphasize the importance that U.S. officials place on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

The idea that there is scarce information about North Korea is a part of journalists' outsized role in constructing knowledge about North Korea for public consumption. Their tendency to mirror each other's coverage and rely on similar quotes from North Korean state media to inform stories, result in Anglophone media outlets using similar narratives to cover North Korea. As technology and platforms, such as Twitter, make it easy for journalists to continually monitor their competition, even when there is uncertainty about the veracity of a news report – as was the case with Kim Jong-un's health in late April and early May 2020 – it is impossible for news outlets to ignore the blaring headlines on CNN that reverberate across various mainstream news organizations. This reliance on other news media sources, and the belief that since it is almost impossible to verify information, is illustrated not only in how journalists talk about the difficulty of sourcing their stories about North Korea, but also in the stories themselves. Although each outlet and each individual journalist seemed to vary in the language they use to caveat rumors, and although there are marked differences between the focus of the stories about the rumors (e.g., some outlets frame them around palace intrigue while others focus on the veracity of the rumors vis-à-vis U.S. and South Korean officials), redundant reporting appeared to be a product of news media's privileging of other news outlets as sources. Although some journalists question other news outlets reporting on Twitter, news coverage of the rumors shows that news outlets tend to cast doubt on North Korean state media reports until they provide photographic or video evidence to corroborate their claims.

Using North Korean state media to verify information speaks to the continued

ambivalence that journalists must navigate when reporting on North Korea. They oscillate between distrust for North Korean state media, calling it propaganda, to using it for confirmation that Kim Jong Un is alive. Even though journalists critique other news outlets, particularly South Korean news media, as untrustworthy, they continue to attribute information in their reporting to the same media sources the criticize. Finally, journalists express reservations about using defector sources in their reporting, but then privilege the accounts of former high-ranking North Korean officials. The common thread that connects this ambivalence is the privileging of sources that support the dichotomy of us versus them to narrate North Korea. As Schudson and Anderson (2009) suggest, we must remain wary of how journalists' claims actually match up to "the reality by which professional power, knowledge, and authority operate" (p. 99). Even as journalists try to assume a "watchdog" role with their coverage of North Korea, they must question how the value they place on "home" government officials and Anglophone news media as credible sources continually perpetuates "banally nationalistic" (Billing, 1995) coverage of North Korea.

Conclusion

The Cold War is said to have ended in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell. However, a quick internet search of the term "North Korea," or scanning headlines from well-respected Anglophone publications, illustrate the staying power of Cold War logics. Anglo-Western understandings of North Korea highlight how different, and even incomprehensible, the country remains over 30 years later. The overarching goal of this dissertation has been to understand the staying power of North Korea as the "enemy" and the "Other." Although popular culture, including films such as *Team America* or *The Interview*, and digital media, such as discussion boards, memes, and Google search results, form part of our understanding of the DPRK, it is easy to dismiss entertainment as a loose or even fantastical version of reality. However, this does not tell us what to make of more "serious" ways of knowing North Korea, namely news media accounts of the nation.

Conversations with journalists tell us the story of how they make sense of North Korea, and what factors or people they think should inform their reporting. The journalists I spoke with provided rich insight into three important aspects of Anglophone reporting on North Korea: (1) the narratives journalists use to describe North Korea and how they justify using those narratives, (2) how important it is for journalists to be proximate to the story – geographically, culturally, and linguistically, and (3) who journalists consider authoritative, credible sources of information about North Korea. In the conclusion, I will the review the answers to these research questions, then suggest how to expand on the findings from this dissertation with future research.

First, I argued that foreign correspondents, local South Korean journalists, and ethnically Korean journalists working for Anglophone news outlets interpret North Korea through a Cold War ideology that emphasizes difference. By privileging existing frames of North Korea as a

security threat and as profoundly different from other countries, I found that journalists centered these frames in their descriptions of North Korea. Even journalists who had covered North Korea for a long time, and who became quite knowledgeable about the country, built knowledge that fits into existing narratives. Ethnically Korean journalists foregrounded the role of ethnic and national identity in how they and their fellow journalists interpreted North Korea.

However, foreign correspondents also self-reflexively critiqued news narratives about North Korea, pointing to various instances of sensationalism and inaccuracy in coverage. These explanations were often complicated by internalized and Orientalized narratives of North Korea, which also relied on a Cold War logic to interpret the country. Despite acknowledging the problems that plague North Korea reporting, journalists justified news narratives that cast North Korea as an unknowable Other by attributing these narratives to (1) North Koreans themselves and the scarcity of information coming out of the country and (2) their perceptions of their "imagined audience." Based on these findings, I will round out this section by proposing an in-depth exploration of actual news audiences. Examining which narratives and identities audiences use to interpret both North Korea itself and news coverage on the nation gives us an opportunity to understand the interplay between news and public opinion.

Second, I argued that journalists used the constraints to eyewitnessing as a justification for their ambivalence toward reporting from inside the country. These real constraints, such as limitations on whether and how often you can go to the DPRK and the constant presence of North Korean minders, become the rationale for valuing journalism from outside the country. Although tangible constraints do exist, journalists' inability to gather information that reinforces the dominant narratives about North Korea helps explain their ambivalence toward eyewitnessing. If journalists were not able to sit down and talk to the DPRK's political elite, or

to observe the country's progress on nuclear and missile development, they placed less value on being there. In addition, journalists who felt they were culturally or linguistically proximate to North Korea used this proximity to legitimize their journalistic authority and to justify the value they placed on eyewitnessing. Given the complex ways that identity factors into claims of cultural and linguistic proximity, I will suggest future research engage fully with how journalists articulate their ascribed and avowed identities. In addition, observing how these identities are at work in the newsroom can provide insight into the role of ethnoracial logics in professional journalism.

Third, I argued that journalists rely on professional norms and Cold War ideology to build the hierarchy of sources that informs their reporting on North Korea. U.S. official sources and Anglophone news outlets belong at the top of the hierarchy. Journalists adhered to well-documented professional norms by privileging U.S. official sources and Anglophone news outlets as sources in their reporting. Although journalists were quick to point the finger at other Anglophone outlets for publishing problematic narratives, their descriptions of news routines suggested journalists still hold esteem for Anglophone news organizations. North Korean defectors/refugees and South Korean news media occupied the bottom of the hierarchy. Journalists leaned heavily on Othering discourses to express their distrust of North Korean defector/refugee sources and their dismissal of South Korean journalism as lacking Anglo-Western media ethics.

However, the tension between professional norms and Cold War ideology was rendered visible in journalists' descriptions of North and South Korean official sources. Journalists, particularly foreign correspondents, suggested that culture and language complicate their interactions with South Korean official sources. This tension was also present in their

descriptions of North Korean official sources, who were approached with skepticism, but valued as a way to balance out other perspectives. Based on this analysis, I will propose future research that examines the role of expertise in the sourcing hierarchy. I suggest a deep dive into journalists' definitions of expertise, how they decide which experts are credible, and which experts are included in news narratives. In addition, interviews with experts will provide insight into experts' narratives about North Korea, how they view their interactions with journalists, and their conception of the role they play in producing news narratives about North Korea.

One of the overarching themes that I find is the ubiquity of the Cold War narratives in the way journalists narrate North Korea, define proximity, and establish a hierarchy of sources. I begin to discuss my findings here:

1. Narratives

Zelizer (2019) argues that in the U.S., journalism has not changed much since the Cold War era. She suggests that a "deep memory of Cold War mindedness" informs American journalism and leads journalists to engage in "dichotomous thinking, an orientation to deference and a repair to news from nowhere" in their journalism (p. 88). Dichotomous thinking allows journalists to "reduce complex and often indecipherable realities into a manageable either/or polarity" (Zelizer, 2019, p. 86). When this polarized viewpoint is coupled with journalists who profess an allegiance to objectivity, problematic logics and narratives become normalized.

In my analysis, I find that journalists' acceptance of critiques of North Korea reporting suggested three things: (1) the Cold War mindset was so deeply embedded in thought and speech that the Othering of North Korea happened unconsciously, (2) Othering North Korea was not considered problematic and had become naturalized, and (3) only the most egregious examples of reporting on erroneous rumors or outright name calling were considered problematic. As Mark

Pedelty (1995) argues, journalists that consider their purpose to be objective often "deny their subjectivities, rather than acknowledge them and critically challenge them" (p. 43). Interestingly, while some journalists talked about upholding "objectivity" and "balance" in their reporting, others expressed skepticism about these normative values. Freelance journalist Bruce Harrison claimed that he did not believe in "the full objectivity they used to teach you" in journalism school (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Another foreign correspondent differentiated between objectivity and honesty in reporting, saying that objectivity could lead journalists to dismiss or ignore certain realities in their reporting (Personal comm, June 2017). A former foreign correspondent suggested that "our job is to be neutral, not to be robots, so there will always be inherent bias you can't ever fully take out" (Personal comm, June 2017). He went on to describe bias as "in the eye of the beholder," suggesting it was the audience should determine the presence or absence of bias in his reporting.

Despite these nuanced discussions of values such as objectivity and balance in journalism, journalists still used language to describe North Korea that interpreted the country through the lens of Cold War logics. This language demonstrates how journalists privilege interpretations of their reporting subjects in political terms (Pedelty, 1995). An Asia-based CNN staff member referred to North Korea as "kind of an official enemy of the U.S." and claimed this status "seems to lower the bar for what you can report about in a lot of Western media" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). A British foreign correspondent pointed out that "American media, in particular, tends to see North Korea in less nuanced terms," but quickly clarified that "I don't mean that there's a good side to Kim Jong-Un, but [North Korea's] a society with lots going on in it" (Personal comm, June 2017). Many foreign correspondents qualified statements that could be perceived as supportive of the Kim regime. This example shows journalists are aware of the

line they cannot cross, lest they appear to be biased in a way that favors North Korea.

In Chapter 2, I found that journalists' descriptions of North Korea as an enemy also speak to a desire to engage in adversarial reporting. Think back to the foreign correspondent who called for "honest" reporting. She explained that reporting on "their side" was important, but that objectivity should not stand in the way of honesty. Her differentiation between honest and objective reporting reflects a deeply ingrained adherence to believing that journalists are the "watchdogs" of government. However, keeping government accountable is usually associated with journalists operating in a democratic context. Applying these same principles to reporting on North Korea seems to do the opposite. Instead of holding North Korea accountable, Anglophone journalists are critiquing from the outside looking in. The eagerness to call out North Korea's "bad behavior" only serves to reify the country's enemy status and mirror Anglo-Western views of North Korea through a Cold War lens.

However, this is not to say that journalists are unaware of the problems associated with Anglophone reporting on North Korea. When asked what they thought about the critiques made of Anglo-Western journalism about North Korea, most of the journalists I spoke with were aware of the critiques of North Korea-related reporting, and many agreed that the criticism was fair. One ethnically Korean journalist suggested that "when you read about North Korea in the American newspapers, you are thinking like North Korea is the enemy of everyone in every country. No. Like China and Russia they're friendly with North Korea" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Journalists overwhelmingly acknowledged that news media was complicit in circulating rumors and misinformation about North Korea, as well as the problematic stereotypes and tropes. Harrison even jokingly suggested he was "part of the disinformation machine" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

The naturalization of Cold War logics and journalists' treatment of North Korea as nothing more than a security threat, were not just obvious among those with little knowledge about North Korea. Journalists who had experience covering North Korea continued to amass knowledge that fed into Cold War narratives, such as differentiating between "the nuclear story" and "the missile story" (Personal comm, June 2017). This same logic also extended to both local South Korean journalists and ethnically Korean journalists acculturated and/or educated in Anglophone countries, who described North Korea by saying "they do some strange things" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019) or suggesting that sensationalistic reporting on Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump is true to who they are (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). These instances of internalized Orientalism are reminders of how Cold War ideology can become naturalized into journalist' vocabulary. This naturalization is what makes ideology so insidious; it can hide in plain sight.

Despite the ubiquity of Cold War thinking in how journalists described North Korea, I found that journalists attempted to separate themselves from problematic coverage. In Chapter 2, I described the three strategies that journalists used to deny responsibility: (1) suggesting that North Korea's own behavior was to blame for problematic news narratives, (2) distinguishing between tabloid coverage and coverage from well-respected outlets, and (3) talking about tangible ways they tried to improve their own coverage of North Korea. By differentiating between "good" and "bad" news outlets – and assuming your news organization falls into the former category – journalists tried to disentangle themselves from sensationalistic coverage of North Korea.

Ethnically Korean journalists also engaged in these strategies, but also used a fourth to distance themselves from problematic coverage. They suggested it was the purview of journalists

that parachuted in or “white, male” foreign correspondents (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). By foregrounding the importance of cultural and linguistic proximity to understanding North Korea, ethnically Korean journalists argued they were not as complicit in these problematic narratives. Ethnically Korean journalists used cultural and linguistic proximity to legitimize them as uniquely qualified to report on North Korea. Despite the claims that cultural and linguistic proximity were an asset to their reporting, ethnically Korean journalists were quick to critique South Korean news media ethics and claim that South Korean reporting on North Korea was contributing to problematic reporting on the DPRK. At the same time, ethnically Korean journalists pointed to foreign correspondents as the problem, denying responsibility for the role they played as a journalist working for an Anglophone news organization.

In addition to these strategies of shifting blame, journalists justified the use of Cold War narratives and disseminating rumors about North Korea by relying on the narrative of scarce information. Journalists were caught between the norms of the profession, which called on them to report on the same things as their competitor-colleagues, and the problem of scarce information. As journalists saw it, scarce information led to rumors, which perpetuated stereotypical ways of understanding by sticking to what you do know to make sense of what you do not know. Another problem with blaming the narrative of scarce information for problematic coverage was the definition of informatio. For the most part, the information in short supply were related to the international threat that North Korea posed.

By claiming that scarcity of information is to blame, journalists placed the fault squarely on North Korea’s opacity. For example, several journalists pointed to the lack of pushback from the North Korean government, and the difficulty of verifying much of their reporting, as creating an atmosphere where journalists were tempted to write whatever they wanted (Personal comm,

Oct. 2019; Personal comm, Oct. 2019). In addition, journalists suggest that there is strong demand from their imagined audience for news about North Korea. One ethnically Korean journalist explained that "whether we can measure it or not, there is this conception that North Korea news is always newsworthy" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). She went on to explain that news about North Korea matters in the "larger context of geopolitical reasons," but that journalists' and news audiences' reason for caring is "because we get limited access to the country. And there's no other country like North Korea, right? We say it like it's such a bizarre thing, but that is reality, at the same time" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Journalists' claims that their reporting depends on what their audiences think suggest the need for further study of news audiences.

1.1 Audiences

Schudson (2001) suggests that foreign correspondents are "independent experts, free to make judgments" instead of relying on editors to correct or supervise them. He points to editors as possessing little knowledge about the place a correspondent is stationed and argues that "readers do not normally have the background to fill in a context to make bare facts comprehensible" (p. 163-4). Journalists often expressed the view that audiences were predisposed to thinking about North Korea in very narrow, stereotypical ways. Freelance journalist Bruce Harrison argued that "no matter what's been reported, I think the ultimate opinion is that Kim's a madman and he's a nuclear threat to their lives" (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

Journalists' views on their imagined audience – as sophisticated news consumers capable of understanding nuanced views or as uneducated and uninterested – can influence the narratives they use to make North Korea legible for their audience. Although this dissertation begins the

conversation on the role of imagined audiences in international news, future research should examine the news audiences themselves. What do news audiences think about the North Korea, and how does their information context influence what they think about the country? During my time in Seoul, I conducted five focus groups with expatriates about their media use opinions on North Korea. By asking participants to reflect on their engagement with South Korean media and media "back home," I was able to understand their unique information environment. I also asked participants to reflect on their consumption of media content related to North Korea and then to engage with headlines pertaining to North Korea, providing their real-time thoughts on media content. Finally, I asked participants about their opinions on the country and what had influenced those opinions. Though these focus groups were outside the scope of this dissertation, I plan on conducting similar focus groups with Korean Americans in the U.S., who also straddle various information contexts, and to conduct a comparative study of news audiences. This future research will supply insight into the way audiences describe North Korea. I hope that comparing journalists' conceptions of their imagined audience with the "real" audiences will make the disconnections between the two visible.

2. Proximity

Geographical proximity, and the practice of eyewitnessing, is considered an important aspect of journalistic practice for those covering events or places that are not easily accessible to audiences. "Being there" imbues journalists with credibility and authority (Zelizer, 2007), so that journalists "parachute in" for short periods of time to provide a more "authentic" look at the event or place in question. As I argued in Chapter 3, journalists expressed ambivalence toward eyewitnessing. Although many journalists did seem to value geographical proximity, suggesting that reporting from South Korea provided them with important context that improved their

reporting, they did not consider eyewitnessing from inside North Korea to supply the same kind of value.

Journalists who did travel to North Korea often had to wrestle with the idea of North Korea in their own heads. The conundrum of eyewitnessing was that journalists often interpreted what they saw based on their prior knowledge about North Korea. One foreign correspondent described traveling to North Korea and feeling like all the sights he saw were familiar.

> "The funny thing is, I walked into these places and I felt like I was walking into a KCNA photo album. Because I've seen this before. Because it's the place that they always go to take photos" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019).

Although journalists use eyewitnessing to confirm their understandings of North Korea, an expert I spoke with suggested that going to North Korea for the first time is "the most dangerous for [journalists] because they feel like the first man to land on the moon, and they're seeing things that nobody in the world has ever seen, and they're putting them together" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). One foreign correspondent in Seoul described trips to North Korea as a "circus," stating that "I don't think you need to go" to report on North Korea (Personal comm, June 2017). The journalist went on to talk how even "battle-hardened journalists" who had covered Iraq and Afghanistan would behave like a "kid in a candy shop" and become "spellbound" (Personal comm, June 2017).

Although journalists suggest that the tangible constraints to eyewitnessing are the reason for their ambivalence toward eyewitnessing, I argue that journalists' views on the value of "being there" link to Cold War ideology. Journalists use existing narratives to decide what kinds of information to value, namely information that supports the narrative of North Korea as an enemy. Because this kind of information is hard to come by when eyewitnessing in North Korea, journalists can rationalize their ambivalence toward eyewitnessing by claiming that going to the

country yields no valuable information. Since journalists cannot freely walk around North Korea, get an exclusive interview with Kim Jong-Un or other members of Pyongyang's elite, observe the inner workings of a North Korean labor camp, or talk to the scientists in charge of developing North Korea's nuclear capabilities, journalists place less value on eyewitnessing. Placing value only on information that depicts North Korea as the enemy, such as the status of the DPRK's nuclear program, obscures the value in other observations that journalists can make from being in North Korea. It is also a reminder of the malleable standards journalists have for eyewitnessing. For example, all journalists who want to interview the U.S. president are not granted an interview. Journalists cannot always readily gain access to prisons, and without a "leak," they are not privy to their home country's government secrets. This is not to say that journalists are wrong – the constraints to eyewitnessing are real, and the circumstances of reporting inside North Korea differ from Anglo-Western understandings of journalism as "the fourth estate." However, journalists' discussions of eyewitnessing bring to the surface the influence that narratives of difference have on their ambivalence toward reporting from North Korea. One former foreign correspondent captures his ambivalence this way:

> "Honestly, I hated North Korea. It was so depressing. I like Korea, I love Korea. I felt like it was this kind of parallel universe where everything was crap. Like, okay this kind of similar but it's crap. I just ended up feeling – I suppose it sounds cheesy, but I have this love for Korea and to see people in that kind of environment where things are obviously a lot worse than they could be. It really kind of bummed me out. Especially when you know there's nothing you can do about it" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

The correspondent touches on the affective dimension of eyewitnessing. But what is striking is his adherence to a Cold War ideology that pities those stuck in a socialist society for not being able to enjoy the conveniences of modern capitalism. Journalism about North Korea oscillates between demonization and pity, from painting North Korea as the enemy, but also normal. Similar to Dower's (1993) argument that the Japanese were portrayed during WWII as either

superhuman or subhuman, but never as human, rings true in the case of North Korea as well. There is an opportunity for journalists to consider what kinds of stories could fill the lacuna between the two spectrums. In particular, considering how various kinds of proximity to North Korea provide fresh perspective helps us think about how affective proximity, in particular, may be an important way of knowing North Korea. As this dissertation has shown, affective proximity is bound up with identity. This next section discusses findings and suggests new research on the role of identity Anglophone newsrooms.

2.1 Identity

Chapter 3 tackled the ways journalists value cultural and linguistic proximity in reporting on North Korea. Journalists who foregrounded the importance of cultural and linguistic proximity in their reporting on North Korea fell into one of two categories: foreign correspondents who expressed regret about not learning Korean and journalists who claimed cultural proximity (i.e., ethnically Korean journalists) and/or linguistic proximity (i.e., journalists that possess Korean language skills). The latter category mostly consisted of ethnically Korean journalists, who argued that cultural proximity imbues eyewitnessing with different meaning. Former AP Koreas bureau chief Jean Lee suggested that Korean Americans should use their ethnicity to their advantage, because during her time in North Korea, she benefited from others' perceptions of her ethnicity along with her linguistic skills (Personal comm, Feb. 2020).

Interestingly, ethnically Korean journalists sometimes conflated their cultural identity with language ability. Some of the ethnically Korean journalists I spoke with mentioned they had formally learned Korean, that they had spoken it at home, or mentioned growing up in a culturally Korean household. By glossing over key details, ethnically Korean journalists – especially those without advanced Korean language skills – seemed to conflate cultural identity

with other tangible skills. Flattening cultural identity into language ability can lead to journalists who are hired based on an ethnoracial logic suggesting "nonwhites should hold jurisdiction over the occupations that exist to engage with other nonwhites" (Abad, 2019, p. 112). However, ethnically Korean journalists have differing levels of Korean language skills, ranging from local South Korean journalists who are fluent in Korean to journalists who may have spoken Korean at home but never learned the language formally. Although asking journalists whether they relied on translators in their interviews gave clarity about the extent of their Korean language abilities, ethnically Korean journalists did not engage deeply with how their level of language ability influences how much they reporting they can do without a translator, unlike many of the foreign journalists who were quick to downplay their Korean language abilities.

Working in Anglophone newsrooms could mean ethnically Korean journalists strategically present themselves as a guide or bridge to understanding North Korea or as culturally and linguistically proximate, even when their language abilities and cultural understandings are limited. However, cultural identity is not the same thing as a journalist's language abilities or how familiar they are with North Korean or South Korean culture. Diasporic identities are not uniform and do not always reflect the mainstream culture of their home countries. In fact, Radhakrishnan (2003) notes that "it is quite customary for citizens who have emigrated to experience distance as a form of critical enlightenment or a healthy "estrangement" from their birthland" (p. 126). Given the pronounced difference between "local" South Koreans and diasporic ethnic Koreans, it is imperative that future studies account for the many ways journalists' national and ethnic identities intersect and diverge. For example, Lim Yun-Suk (2006) described her experience working as a South Korean reporter at a foreign news outlet. She gave an example of a time when South Korean delegates to the four-party talks she

was covering requested she withhold information “because it will make Korea look bad” (2006, p. 400). Local journalists and even ethnically Korean journalists are constantly balancing the act of keeping their home country happy or risking heavy criticism.

Just as juxtaposing foreign journalists with local journalists creates a false dichotomy, I argue that the complexity of “looking local” versus actually “being local” complicates how we understand cultural identity. As Anglo-Western organizations embrace the push for diversity and for ‘local faces’ in their newsrooms, ethnoracial logics (Abad, 2019) could become foundational for determining journalists’ roles based an assumed tie between how a person is racialized and the “cultural” knowledge and skills they possess. This could lead to ethnically Korean journalists being asked to do all of the “bridging” and language-related work, based on the assumption that a person’s race or ethnicity determines the “inherent racial ethnic knowledge an employee possesses” (Abad, 2019, p. 111). In other words, if news organizations hire local journalists to boost their news organization’s bonafides but use ethnoracial logic to determine the kinds of roles they perform, then ethnically Korean journalists may be relegated to remain news assistants and labor as glorified fixers/stringers. Future research that incorporates newsroom ethnographies supplies the chance to observe not just how journalists talk about their identities, but how those identities are at work in social interactions. In this next section, I examine how identity plays a role in how journalists create a hierarchy of sources.

3. Sourcing

Journalists’ sourcing choices are an important way they can choose which realities they present to news audiences. Pedelty (1995) argues that through source selection, journalists’ biases “remain hidden within the opinions of sources” (p. 100). Although journalists varied in their description of the process of source selection, several mentioned “you have to basically

trust your intuition" (Kretschmer, personal comm, Oct. 2019). If journalists rely on instinct to decide which sources are credible, this leaves room for journalists to make choices informed by their own individual ways of viewing the world. It also points to the subjective nature of sources and the problem of presenting sources as neutral sources of information.

As Chapter 2 illustrated, journalists used the narrative that information about North Korea is scarce to justify their own problematic narratives. In Chapter 4, I connected this narrative of information scarcity to journalists' hierarchy of sources. I found that journalists primarily relied on professional norms and Othering narratives to build their hierarchy. Anglo-Western perspectives were privileged, with U.S. official sources and Anglophone news outlets thought to stand for authoritative, credible information. To journalists, U.S. government sources were mostly uncontroversial and there was no discussion casting doubt on what they said or attempting to decipher messages; instead they were "posited as cool, authoritative, and rational voices in a wilderness of primitive conflict" (Pedelty, 1995, p. 187). U.S. officials were used to confirm or deny rumors and were considered available – although not always willing to divulge information. Since local South Korean reporters usually build up sources in the South Korean government, U.S. government officials were generally the purview of journalists based in Washington, D.C. or foreign correspondents. This points to an important aspect of the hierarchy, which is the connection between whose information is privileged and who has access – namely, journalists based in Washington, D.C. and foreign journalists.

The privileging of Anglophone journalists points to the next rung in the hierarchy, occupied by Anglophone news sources. Journalists talked about their general trust in Anglophone news outlets by mentioning which outlets they consider trustworthy. Alastair Gale, the former Seoul bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*, listed Reuters and *The New York*

Times as trustworthy sources, juxtaposing them with problematic "tabloid shock stories" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). Freelance journalist Jason Strother pointed out that "there is a certain trust that some people only give to the major newspapers" and when he pitches to an editor, they are more receptive to a story that has already been in *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post* (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Although journalists often critiqued other news outlets, particularly tabloids or even reputable news organizations who chose to report on unsubstantiated claims, their descriptions of routines – such as checking what their competitor-colleagues were publishing and editors who would call on journalists to keep up with the competition – belied their critiques. Journalists described monitoring Twitter as part of their daily journalistic practice, to see what their colleagues at other Anglophone news outlets were writing about that day. One foreign correspondent described setting up TweetDeck, an application that helps organize and manage your Twitter account, so that he could quickly see what experts and journalists who actively followed North Korea thought about an issue (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Journalist also described instances of editors asking journalists to cover something, based on another Anglophone news organization's reporting. One ethnically Korean journalist pointed to an instance when unsubstantiated information – what she called "random misinformation" – made its way into news media. She recalls that once CNN picked up the story, her editors "started to get onto us" about why we were not publishing the same story (Personal comm, Nov. 2019).

On the other hand, conversations with journalists suggested they considered North Korean defectors/refugees and South Korean news media unreliable sources. Journalists suggested that defectors' versions of the truth and South Korean media ethics ran contrary to the Anglo-Western valuing of truth and verification of facts. Foreign correspondents, in particular,

explained that instances where defectors were thought to have lied "revealed that you can't really trust what defectors say 100%" (Strother, personal comm, Dec. 2019) and that it was important to understand what kind of objectives defectors had in reaching out, particularly if they were trying to get publicity for their NGO or cause (Harrison, personal comm, Feb. 2020). This is not to say that journalists did not value defector accounts, especially their firsthand testimony of what life was like in North Korea. But journalists treated defectors' accounts as if it was one version of the truth, while official sources represented *the* truth. One exception to this distrust were accounts from defectors who were formerly high-ranking North Korean government officials. Their proximity to power rendered their accounts more trustworthy to journalists, who were interested in narratives about North Korea beyond the mundane details of a defector's day-to-day existence.

In addition, many journalists I spoke with expressed some distrust of South Korean news media, whether it had to do with critiquing the partisan nature of South Korean news (Personal comm, Oct. 2019) or "the lack of journalistic ethics in South Korea" (Lee, personal comm, Feb. 2020). An ethnically Korean journalist recalled when the *Chosun Ilbo*, a South Korean newspaper reported on a story, her editor only approached her about it after the AP had reported something similar (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Although there was some pushback on this criticism among ethnically Korean journalists, who suggested it was not entirely fair (Personal comm, Nov. 2019) or argued, "I'm not one of those people who think that South Korean news coverage is quite lacking or they don't really know fact checking, because I do respect the work the *Chosun Ilbo* does" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019), journalists working at Anglophone news organizations viewed their journalistic ethics as superior to South Korean news outlets. However, local South Korean journalists who used to work for local South Korean news organizations also

expressed their reservations. One local journalist said that "in Korea, not many news organizations have a good fact-checking system. They have a very tight deadline. Because they can't really afford it, so they don't really get to double-check" (Personal comm, Oct. 2019). She followed up by saying that her news organization was much more cautious. This illustrates how local South Korean journalists working for Anglophone news outlets may, as a part of their journalistic practice and to belong to the culture of the organization, internalize the standards of Anglo-Western journalism. By engaging in a type of "internalized Orientalism," local journalists can become part of an elite class that operates in a postcolonial state by "construct[ing] themselves as the Self by attributing the inferior aspects of the local culture to the rest of the society, who becomes the Other" (Alahmed, 2020, p. 410).

Finally, how journalists value North Korean and South Korean official sources illustrates the tension between professional norms and the impulse to Other. While journalists suggested North Korean official sources were necessary for balance, they also expressed a need to "read between the lines" and to scrutinize North Korean state media because it was propaganda. The underlying assumption was that Anglo-Western sources could be trusted implicitly, while North Korean sources needed to be interrogated and questioned by journalists. Journalists became the experts on interpreting North Korean sources, while U.S. officials were providing information to journalists. In other words, journalists respected U.S. officials enough to trust the information, while they felt the need to question the veracity of North Korean "propaganda."

Although South Korean official sources were considered trustworthy, both foreign correspondents and ethnically Korean journalists struggled with what they viewed as unequal access. One foreign correspondent pointed out that "the foreign media are at a great disadvantage here" because they are unable to get access, or accreditation, to cover certain ministries (Personal

comm, Nov. 2019). In addition to these structural issues of access, one foreign journalist talked about how South Korean government spokespeople were often proficient English speakers but could not present their information in a way that resonated with Western audiences (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). This disconnection between what the journalist viewed as South Korean values and Anglo-Western values is how some foreign journalists view South Korean government officials. Although their professional norms would lead them to value official sources, foreign journalists still do not implicitly trust South Korean government officials in the same way that journalists often trust their "home" governments.

One important aspect that this dissertation briefly touched on is the idea that sources are important because they supply a specific kind of expertise. In this next section, I propose research that engages extensively with what expertise means in the context of North Korea journalism and how it fits into the hierarchy of sources.

3.1 Expertise

In Chapter 4, I explored journalists' reliance on professional norms and Cold War ideology to form their hierarchy of sources. I propose that a third, silent partner is also at work: journalists' conceptions of expertise. In the North Korea context, expertise is difficult to define. Some would argue that experts who accurately predict North Korea's behavior are important. But there is an overwhelming notion that all experts are, to some degree, "guessperts" (Personal comm, Nov. 2019). Journalists' overreliance on the narrative of scarce information makes North Korea mysterious and unknowable. Much like journalists' hierarchy of sources, their hierarchy of expertise is ordered by an underlying set of ideological narratives.

Dower (1993) argued that racialized stereotypes "were strongly reinforced by nineteenth-century Western science" (p. 10) with experts providing commentary on Japan during WWII that

was “ethnocentric and condescending and perpetuated in their own way a variety of racial or cultural stereotypes about the Japanese” (p. 94). If present-day North Korea experts can provide this kind of value-laden commentary, disguised as science, then it becomes imperative to question how journalists evaluate expertise. Therefore, understanding how journalists think about expertise, and whose expertise they value, can determine the perspectives journalists include in their reports. Determinations of who qualifies as an expert source is inextricably bound to journalistic values, such as speed, accuracy, and balance. In other words, journalists often rely on “media friendly” experts who can supply pithy quotes in a short timeframe.

For journalists to make determinations about whose guesses are “more correct” than others, journalists must hone their skills as interactional experts. Studies of journalist-expert interactions have shown that experts believe journalists are more concerned with “selling” their stories and journalists believe experts cannot communicate well (Maillé et al., 2010). However, Wien (2014) suggests that experts tend to be more critical of journalists than vice versa. I propose future research that uses my interviews with journalists as a starting point to understand how journalists come to define and trust experts. Then, I propose examining the journalist-expert interaction through interviews with experts and observations of public-facing interactions between journalists and experts on social media platforms. This allows us to grapple with how the journalist-expert interactions themselves inform the news content that gets produced.

4. Conclusion

This dissertation has shown the important ways that narratives inform journalists’ perceptions of how they do, and should, practice journalism. We saw how Othering narratives could turn seasoned war reporters into a “kid in a candy store,” fascinated by the North Korea they finally got to see. In fact, the Cold War mentality that undergirded journalists’ descriptions

of North Korea was so powerful, and so deeply entrenched, that even as ethnically Korean journalists contested this mentality, they also engaged in strategic ways of using Orientalism to make the case for Anglo-Western news outlets to hire them and to make sense of their role as an Anglophone journalist. In some ways, this points to the importance journalists placed on their identity as news professionals working for Anglophone news organizations. It also reminds us that identities are intersectional and situational, and that in foreign correspondence, using dichotomous categories like "foreign" and "local" are problematic.

This dissertation confirmed the changing demographics within international news organizations (Seo, 2016). In the North Korea context, the increasing diversity in Anglophone newsrooms in Seoul occurred even more rapidly because of Donald Trump and the extensive Anglophone media coverage of verbal sparring between Trump and Kim, along with the various summits and overtures to peace. As diversity becomes a buzzword in journalism, we must be careful not to package up and commodify the complexities of journalists' ascribed identities. This is particularly important in the context of international journalism, where the hierarchy of labor is clear in the uneven positions of power that local and foreign journalists hold. Similarly, we cannot assume that journalists' avowed identities inoculate them from dichotomous thinking. Working in an Anglophone newsroom often means creating news narratives filtered through a Western-centric lens. This environment makes it easy for ethnically Korean journalists to engage in strategic ways of assert their value, which also essentializes them. Ethnically Korean journalists are also capable of internalizing problematic narratives and filters and naturalizing them as part of Anglo-Western journalism practice.

The next step is to connect what journalists told us with how they practice journalism. Comparing how journalists talk about North Korea in a conversation versus how they write about

it in an article creates an opportunity to see whether journalists' identities, and their self-reflexive accounts of trying to avoid sensationalism, influence the content they produce. One ethnically Korean journalist put it this way: "Just the fact that everyone has something to say about North Korea says a lot about the role that the media has played. People know. It's out there. People don't see humans living in North Korea. People see Kim Jong-Un and a rocket. I'm serious. It's almost like a character in a movie" (Personal comm, Dec. 2019). Studying how journalists imagine North Korea may seem disconnected from the reality this journalist describes. But, as this dissertation argues, journalists' use of Cold War ideologies to Other and demonize North Korea trickle down into their journalism practice. These problematic narratives color the way journalists gather information, what kind of information they privilege, and who they approach for information. As this dissertation shows, ethnoracial logics are also built into what kinds of proximity journalists claim and value. Bringing to the surface the hidden ideologies that shape journalistic knowledge production about North Korea helps us get one step closer to using research to improve journalism practice.

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