

North Korea's baby steps for the Internet

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Talks between North Korea and some of its most powerful neighbors continue to be bumpy at best as the hermit nation keeps playing its trump card of threatening to become a nuclear power. Whether Kim Jong-Il's regime actually does have nuclear capabilities and the ability to produce weapons with them remains a source of debate, but one thing is clear: Even the isolated peninsula is not shying away from investing in the Internet.

Since it was launched last summer, North Korea's Web site to promote the country with foreigners in mind has taken many by surprise, not least because of its sleek look and well-organized contents.

There are currently about 30 Web sites backed by Pyongyang, but most are like www.uriminzokkiri.com, which is a site largely devoted to singing the praises of Kim Jong-Il and his father, as well as the virtues of the hermit nation. In contrast, Naenara is available not only in Korean, but also seven other languages, which also include the languages spoken in the five countries that make up the ongoing six-party talks over the disarming of North Korea, namely English, Russian, Chinese and Japanese, in addition to French and German.

Those who connect to www.kcckp.net/en find that there is actually no photo of the Dear Leader on its homepage, but rather the focus is on the need for the two Koreas to reunite. In addition, the site promotes North Korea as a tourist destination as well as a place for foreign companies to do business.

Under the IT industry section, for instance, the government highlights its Korea Computer Centre, which "develops and supplies software and hardware products for various fields such as operating system, computer network, control and signal processing, and information security."

Meanwhile, in the foreign investment section, the site even has an advertisement for the Hwiparam car, a line of Fiats from Italy that are reassembled in North Korea with financing from the Unification Church.

Pyongyang has also ensured that it gets feedback from its Web browsers by allowing them to contact its webmaster about "what you feel and what you want to get" from Naenara in the future.

One Japanese blogger, however, pointed out that even if one registered as a Naenara user, it was effectively impossible to get news that the site had promised solely to its registered users. In addition, he said that any comments to the webmaster remained unanswered.

"But if you are really craving for the slow life in this busy world, North Korea really is the place to be," the blogger added.

Interestingly enough, though, the Naenara site is not accessible in the democratic South, as authorities in Seoul worry that it might brainwash some of its people.

As for computer use in North Korea, the proliferation of desktops and laptops is far from high. In addition, Pyongyang has made clear that the Internet is available for only several thousand people who have been approved to be connected and already have a phone line with international connection. Reporters Without Borders, a non-profit organization that monitors press freedom worldwide, pointed out that Kim Jong-Il's regime is fully aware of the Internet's potential to bring a

flood of uncensored information which in turn could fan the flames of public opinion against the dictatorial government.

There is no doubt, however, that Pyongyang recognizes just how powerful global connectivity can be, not just to proliferate its own beliefs, but also to wreck havoc in other countries. For instance, according to South Korea's Defense Ministry estimates from late last year, North Korea has trained at least 600 computer hackers. In addition, the ministry argued that the hackers were being groomed to launch a cyberwar on South Korea, Japan or the United States.

Still, North Korea's isolation from the rest of the world can be felt even in cyberspace. ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, has not yet authorized a domain name for the country, even though the government has repeatedly asked for the site of ".kp".

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