

Wary NKorea struggles to stay afloat in info age

February 3 2014, by Eric Talmadge



In this Jan. 8, 2013 file photo, a North Korean student works at a computer terminal inside a computer lab at Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang, North Korea, during a tour by Executive Chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt. North Korea is literally off the charts regarding Internet freedoms. There essentially aren't any. But the country is increasingly online. Though it deliberately and meticulously keeps its people isolated and in the dark about the outside world, it knows it must enter the information age to survive in the global economy. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder, File)

It's late afternoon at the e-library in North Korea's Kim Il Sung University, where row after row of smartly dressed students sit quietly, their faces bathed in the glow of computer displays as they surf the Internet. On the surface, it's a familiar-seeming scene, which is exactly why officials are offering it up for a look.

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As with so many other aspects of its internal workings, North Korea has tried hard to keep its relationship to the Internet hidden from foreign eyes. But it opened that door just a crack recently for The Associated Press to reveal a self-contained, tightly controlled Intranet called Kwangmyong, or "Bright."

North Korea thinks Bright is the authoritarian answer to the freewheeling Internet.

One of the first things an outside observer notices at Kim Il Sung U is that the students are actually studying. Not wasting time on Facebook or Reddit, no BuzzFeed. In fact, the sites they surf most likely aren't even on the Internet, but on the North-Korea-only Bright.

Chats and email? Monitored.

Content? Restricted to the point that the use of Bright hardly even needs to be watched by officials.

How about the OS? It's "Red Star," now available in version 3.0, which looks a lot like the Microsoft operating system, but is used only in North

Korea. Red Star has audio and video players, and even a game—Korean chess. There's a Firefox-style search engine called "Our Country" that helps users navigate around an estimated 1,000 to 5,500 websites, mostly for universities, government offices, libraries and state-run corporations. Most North Koreans have no access to the Internet at all.



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"The goal is to reap the benefits of information technology, while

keeping out potentially corrosive foreign influences," said Scott Bruce, a North Korea IT expert and analyst at the Arlington, Virginia-based nonprofit CRDF Global.

Copies of Red Star have found their way outside of the North and been studied abroad. But North Korea is so secretive about Bright, which it launched more than a decade ago, that it is off-limits to even the foreign technical advisers it brings in. It can be accessed only in the North and is meant exclusively for domestic use.

"I haven't had a time when I've been allowed to use the Intranet—since the point is that it is not open to foreigners," said Will Scott, a computer sciences instructor at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology who has worked about as closely with North Korea's attempt to get wired as any other foreigner.

Through daily interactions with North Korean students at his university, however, Scott has been able to glean a general outline of what Bright is all about.

"The Intranet provides a connection between industry, universities and the government. It seems to be focused on information propagation, rather than commerce, entertainment or communication," he told the AP. "Given the limited resources in the country, where computers are likely not to be owned by individuals, and are a valuable resource, this has a striking resemblance to the uses first made of the Internet in the U.S. when it was introduced in the '80s."

Technologically, he said, North Korea's Intranet is a mini-Internet, with a combination of joint venture companies and vaguely government-affiliated labs that collectively maintain the core infrastructure that exists on the global Web.

Graduate students and North Korean professors at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology are allowed to access the real Internet from a dedicated computer lab, similar to the e-library at Kim Il Sung University. They receive the same speed and unfiltered access that foreign instructors do, although everyone's access is monitored. Scott said the graduate students don't use the Internet nearly as much as Americans would, treating it more like the way Western students might visit a library to find books.



In this Oct. 5, 2011 file photo, portraits of North Korea's late leaders Kim Il Sung, left, and Kim Jong Il hang on a wall over a bank of computers at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. North Korea is literally off the charts regarding Internet freedoms. There essentially aren't any. But the country is increasingly online. Though it deliberately and meticulously keeps its people isolated and in the dark about the outside world, it knows it must enter the information age to survive in the global economy. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder, File)

Students' emails must be reviewed and approved by one of the vice presidents of the university before they can be sent, which, Scott said, means they rarely use email.

"There is some resistance to providing Internet access to students because it requires some level of political capital, and is generally discouraged by higher-up ministries as not worth the potential danger," he said. "I think you would find a surprising lack of technical surveillance on the Intranet, due largely to the high level of self-censorship built into the collective psyche in the country."

Because of the general population's lack of experience with the Internet—and the perception that it is dangerous, forbidden territory—there is no grassroots clamor in North Korea for change.

So deeply engrained are the government's teachings about dealings with the outside world that even some of the students at Kim Il Sung University said they see the Internet as a tool best used in moderation.



In this May 15, 2013 file photo, young North Koreans take a closer look at the Samjiyon tablet computer produced for the North Korean market for sale at the 16th Pyongyang Spring International Trade Fair in Pyongyang. North Korea is literally off the charts regarding Internet freedoms. There essentially aren't any. But the country is increasingly online. Though it deliberately and meticulously keeps its people isolated and in the dark about the outside world, it knows it must enter the information age to survive in the global economy. (AP Photo/Jon Chol Jin, File)

"I use the Internet often to look for English reference books," said Ri Jong Hyok, a 21-year-old math student. "But actually the national Intranet has most of the books that I need so I don't need to use it so much."

Still, some experts believe that as more North Koreans become familiar with the benefits of going online—a trend that would seem inevitable if North Korea is to keep afloat in the information age—it will become increasingly difficult for the ruling regime to keep the IT dam from bursting.

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