

How Kim Jong Un became the target of 'The Interview'

December 18 2014, by Jake Coyle



This photo provided by Columbia Pictures - Sony shows, from left, 1st AD Jonathan Watson, DP Brandon Trost, Evan Goldberg, and Seth Rogen on the set of Columbia Pictures' "The Interview." (AP Photo/Columbia Pictures - Sony, Ed Araquel)

A few weeks ago, when a freshly stoned Seth Rogen sat down for a lunch interview about "The Interview," the likelihood of trouble seemed remote.

"You're always hoping nothing horrible is going to happen, obviously," said Rogen. "If something horrible happened and they were like, 'It's inappropriate to release this movie now,' we'd ultimately go, 'Yeah, we got to make it and got paid in advance.'"

Unfortunately, Rogen's chuckling hypothetical has come to pass. After a devastating hacking attack on Sony Pictures and threats of terrorist attacks when "The Interview" was set to open in theaters on Christmas Day, Sony canceled the release of Rogen's film on Wednesday. The real-world geopolitics that initially served as fodder for parody in "The Interview" have upended one of Hollywood's biggest holiday releases.

"The Interview," which depicts a hapless assassination attempt on North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, enraged a country extremely sensitive to portrayals of its dictator and the film has led to one of the worst cyber-hacking crimes in corporate history.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press on Wednesday that federal investigators have now connected North Korea to the hacks that have roiled Sony Pictures and aired its dirty laundry in huge leaks of private emails.

The still unraveling effects have put an uneasy spotlight on a goofy, R-rated comedy, with some questioning Sony's decision to make a film that was sure to provoke an isolated nation. The filmmakers—who declined requests to add to their earlier, pre-hacking comments to the AP—describe striving to push the limits of what a major studio would support.

"When it comes to the [movies](#) we've made at Sony, they've just got (guts)," Evan Goldberg, who co-directed the film with Rogen, said by phone before the hacking leaks. "They just all agreed to it really quickly, much to our luck. And before anyone knew it, we were filming the

movie and it's too late."

Rogen and Goldberg initially conceived of the film as about North Korea's former leader, Kim Jong Il, who died in late 2011. Goldberg says they did "a big old search" of the world's dictators, settling on North Korea because its bizarreness, he said, was rife for comedy.

There are precedents. In "The Great Dictator" (1940), Charlie Chaplin played a version of Adolf Hitler, dubbed Adenoid Hynkel. Rogen and Goldberg could have similarly fictionalized their central character. But the two, weaned on quasi-real comedies like "The Larry Sanders Show" and greatly influenced by their spell as writers on Sacha Baron Cohen's "Da Ali Show," wanted to keep the film grounded in reality. In their last movie, the apocalypse comedy hit "This Is the End," its stars played variations of themselves.



In this Dec. 11, 2014 file photo, actors Seth Rogen, right, and James Franco attend the premiere of the Sony Pictures' film "The Interview" in Los Angeles. Amid threats by hackers against movie theater's showing the film, Rogen and Franco pulled out of all media appearances promoting the film Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2014, canceling a BuzzFeed Q&A and Rogen's planned guest spot Thursday on "Late Night With Seth Meyers." (Photo by Dan Steinberg/Invision/AP Images, File)

"When you're on that set with James Franco playing James Franco and Mike Cera playing Mike Cera, you're like: 'Well why would we have, like, King Jong Jon, a fake dictator of East Korea, when we could just do something real?'" said Goldberg.

"We were always like, 'It's more exciting than making a regular movie,'" said Rogen, a renowned weed advocate who happily acknowledged smoking before the interview. "It adds a link to the real world, which is exciting."

After seeing a Mike Wallace interview on "60 Minutes," Rogen and Goldberg came up with the idea of centering the movie around an entertainment TV show host (James Franco) landing an [interview](#) with Kim and being tasked by the CIA to kill him. Though the movie ultimately ends in a fiery death for the Korean leader, the film equally satirizes American culture. Franco's vapid host and Kim pal around together through much of the movie.

"I'm sure back (when they were writing it) some of the stuff seemed absurd, like this could never happen—a pop culture figure from America going to hang out with the head of North Korea," said Franco by phone. "But since we've made it, Dennis Rodman went over there. Reality is matching the craziness of the script."

With only one box-office slip in Rogen and Goldberg's history (2011's "The Green Hornet") and coming off the success of "This Is the End" (\$101 million domestically), "The Interview" was financially a good bet for Sony. Costing a relatively modest \$40 million, the film was expected to make around \$30 million in its opening weekend.

But the bigger risk for Sony was always inflaming an unpredictable regime. Leaked emails revealed that Kazuo Hirai, chief executive of Sony in Japan, asked for the film's climatic fatal explosion—including an image of Kim's face melting—to be toned down. Other emails reveal Sony Pictures chief Michael Lynton moving to distance Sony's name from the film in promotional materials.

An email from Rogen to Sony Pictures co-chairman Amy Pascal showed him arguing against too much sensitivity: "This is now a story of Americans changing their movie to make North Koreans happy," he wrote.



In this Dec. 2, 2014 file photo, cars enter Sony Pictures Entertainment headquarters in Culver City, Calif. Hackers calling themselves Guardians of Peace on Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2014 released another round of data leaks, including ominous threats against the premiere of Sony Pictures' film "The Interview," in which the group references the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. (AP Photo/Nick Ut, File)

Soon after the release of the trailer for "The Interview" in June, the North Korean Foreign Ministry responded with a statement calling the film "an act of war" and declaring its maker a "gangster filmmaker." Rogen compared the response to the closest a comedian can come to winning an Oscar.

"We did a lot of high-fiving," said Rogen, who noted they were quickly pulled into a meeting with concerned studio executives. "When an entire country—a nuclear power—condemns you and your movie, it's really exciting."

As alterations were made to the "The Interview" (emails show back-and-forth through early October on the explosion scene), its Oct. 10 release date was pushed to December. Test screening suggested the film was playing well. Little had been heard from North Korea since the summer.

"Going into the testing process, there was an anxiety: What if it is just offensive? What if we've done something that's just deemed inappropriate?" said Goldberg. "And every preview went awesome."



A woman passes movie posters displayed at the Landmark Sunshine Cinema, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014 in New York. The theatre has canceled the New York premiere of "The Interview," as the fallout from the Sony Pictures Entertainment hack, that began four weeks ago, escalated after the shadowy group calling themselves Guardians of Peace ramped up their attack beyond corporate espionage and threatened moviegoers with violence reminiscent of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

"At its core, it's just a movie," said Rogen. "And I mean that in the very best way."

Rogen said they were "90 percent, 99 percent sure" that North Korea would only respond with bluster. But some of his comments in November now seem ominous.

"I don't even know if they've seen it yet," he said. "We heard they might have been able to hack into one of our servers and actually watch the

movie."

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Citation: How Kim Jong Un became the target of 'The Interview' (2014, December 18) retrieved 3 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-kim-jong.html>

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