

NKSC Information Dissemination Program Frequently Asked Questions

1. How do USBs get to North Korea?

NKSC uses our network of partners in South Korea, China and North Korea to discreetly move information into North Korea through existing cross-border trade routes in China. The North Korea-China border is much more porous than many might realize, as studies show that tens of thousands of North Koreans and Chinese traders do business across this border.

2. When the USBs get to North Korea, how are they distributed?

The USBs are distributed to people within North Korea who have the ability to disperse them. The data we have shows that the USBs that we have sent reach border cities such as Shinuiju and Hyesan, as well as Pyongyang, Cheongjin, Hamheung, Pyongsung, Wonsan, and Sunchon. To protect our contacts in North Korea, this is the most detail we can provide.

3. What kind of content is uploaded onto the USBs?

NKSC uploads a diverse range of informative and entertaining content, including movies and dramas, documentaries (including short films made by North Korean defectors), South Korean newspapers as PDFs, an offline version of Wikipedia translated into the North Korean dialect, and radio show recordings.

Examples of movies we have sent in recently are:

- “The Piano Playing President” a South Korean film that portrays the democratic election systems in South Korea and parliamentary campaigning methods
- “President Lincoln”, “The Attorney”, and “12 Years a Slave”, which touch on the theme of the foundation of democratic institutions in a country
- “Steve Jobs” to explore themes of entrepreneurship and innovative start-up business models, new ideas, and bold choices
- “Super China”, a South Korean documentary on China’s economic transition
- “The Rise of the Great Power,” a twelve-episode Chinese documentary produced by CCTV on the development of the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, and Germany

4. Why not send information that directly challenges the North Korean government?

The safety of North Koreans who will access this media is of utmost importance to us. Thus, we do not send any content that directly antagonizes the North Korean government, as it can endanger North Koreans.

Moreover, the North Korean government has effectively utilized information controls to tell North Koreans that many foreign countries are hostile in nature. Sending information that directly challenges or criticizes the North Korean government would only be proving the propaganda true. Instead, through our selected media, we intend to provide North Koreans a visual or illustrative idea of what life is like in other parts of the world.

5. Won't people be executed for watching, possessing, or sharing foreign media? How do you feel about putting people in danger?

The North Korean government strictly prohibits access to foreign information, believing that information poses a threat to the government's continued existence by challenging their political and social narrative. Thus, it is true that individuals can suffer severe punishment for watching, possessing, or sharing foreign media and this does give rise to a challenging moral question.

As a principle, NKSC believes that access to information and freedom of expression is not a privilege, but a fundamental right through which NKSC seeks to empower North Koreans.

Our work is based on the following facts on information demand and IT infrastructure in North Korea:

- Access to foreign information in North Korea has steadily and significantly risen in the last twenty years. North Koreans are aware that foreign information can be accessed, and it is a coveted commodity.
- North Koreans in all socioeconomic classes are making the decision to curb oppressive regulations to continuously seek more information, in ever-more enterprising ways. Not just 'ordinary' North Koreans seek, watch, listen, and share foreign media. Individuals who would be considered 'elite', who are in positions of influence or rank in the government are also actively seeking, watching, and listening to foreign media. They are constantly seeking new, inventive ways to avoid detection.



- For several years, the North Korean government has been manufacturing its own hardware and devices, including cell phones (Android-based Arirang), tablet PCs (Woolim), and even USBs. Simply being in possession of a USB, for example, does not automatically lead to punishment.

With safety and security to be of utmost importance, NKSC works on an ongoing basis with partners in the technology and digital security community to employ methods such as disguising content and encryption to make access to information as safe as possible for North Koreans.

6. How do you know people have been viewing the media you send into North Korea?

First, foreign media is a highly coveted commodity in North Korea. Various kinds of hardware and media devices can be found in the North Korean 'jangmadang' and are sold and shared in other informal ways between individuals.

In addition to video footage of people viewing the media that we have sent into North Korea, our field contacts regularly provide us feedback, such as requesting the most recent episodes of South Korean dramas that we have sent.

7. What hardware do North Koreans have?

NKSC carries out interviews with defectors in China and South Korea. We constantly engage in fact-finding and research to understand the IT and media infrastructure in North Korea, so that any external hardware and information that we send supplements what exists in North Korea.

Our recent study on the media and IT infrastructure in North Korea shows that generally, people who live in border cities or in Pyongyang are more likely to have access to different kinds of devices, including TVs (with USB ports, allowing them to watch media straight from a USB), DVD players, or radios. A smaller percentage of people may have a computer or tablet PC and many have a device called a notetel, a portable media player with USB and SD card outlets, which can play DVDs and can also have a radio and TV tuner.

Interestingly, certain kinds of technology such as cell phones and TVs were previously only available to the 'elite'. Nowadays, with inexpensive surplus models from China entering the North Korean market, the broader population is able to obtain these devices.



Thus, there are a reported three million subscribers to the domestic 3G network, called Koryolink. This is only the number of people known to be subscribed to the official network, so unofficial cell phone use is also prevalent. Subscribers are predominantly in Pyongyang but cell phone usage exists outside of Pyongyang, especially in North Korea-China border cities. News agencies report that most Pyongyang residents between ages 20 - 50 have a cell phone.

8. What media is popular in North Korea?

Most recently, we received feedback that amongst 'Spartacus' and 'The Hunger Games' were well received in North Korea. In terms of South Korean media, the drama Jeong Do-Jeon, and movie 'Ode to My Father' have also popular.

9. Does NKSC do, or support the border balloon launches?

NKSC is not involved in any way with any border balloon launches.

We do not condone visible antagonism or aggression and do not support any actions that may lead increased aggression or instability on the South Korea-North Korea border. Our approach is to accelerate people powered change, prioritizing the need to focus on empowering North Koreans who are inside North Korea. We have found that sending in devices and information through our land routes is most effective to reach North Koreans.