

American journalist Edgar Snow was considered by many in the US State Department a pro-Communist sympathizer and his writings about China's revolutionary leader Mao Zedong little more than propagandistic fodder. The fact that Snow and Mao first met in a Communist camp in Yan'an during the 1930s certainly affected State Department officials' view of him. Thus, in 1965 when Mao invited Snow to Beijing for an interview (interviews with Snow were Mao's preferred channel to reach to the US--official diplomatic channels be damned) officials in the US paid little attention to what was said. The comments made were, [according to Henry Kissinger](#), "startling," or "would have been startling had anyone in Washington paid attention to them," for they revealed Mao's, and thus China's, willingness to reconsider its adversarial relationship with the US.

Historical parallels are troublesome because no two events, time periods, or countries are entirely similar. Nevertheless, one cannot help but attempt to connect past to present as a way to project the future. Enter The Associated Press (AP). It's recent deal with the KCNA to open a bureau in North Korea, a country which ranks 178/179 on the [Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index](#), has put its reputation, has directed put the spotlight on The AP's much-vaunted credibility as an independent, credible news source. The AP's agreement to co-host a photo exhibition with the KCNA has attracted even more attention. Given the stakes, we here at SinoNK think its both appropriate and worthy of all the attention. - Steven Denney, Assistant Editor

Access to Propaganda: On the Associated Press Deal with North Korea

by Steven Denney

Into the Great Unknown | The Associated Press (AP), one of the world's most respected sources for breaking news is banking on making the deal of the century. It is again 1965 and Edgar Snow is being called forth to Beijing for an exclusive interview. But in 2012 it is Pyongyang and Snow is not actually Snow, but a couple of well-known AP journalists, and there is no interview, *per se*, but an entire country to cover.

This is the preferred historical parallel that the AP is hoping will be made when a writer as prolific and insightful as Henry Kissinger writes a book entitled *On the DPRK*. The critics will be silenced by time and result and the AP will maintain its much-vaunted status as *the* go-to source for critical, independent, and reliable news.

Or so Kathleen Carroll and many others at the AP hope. In the meantime, there looms over the AP the question of whether, by agreeing to play by the home team's rules, the AP's decision to open a bureau in Pyongyang is not the start of a new era but [a Faustian deal](#).

The joint AP-KCNA photo exhibition earlier this year is a prime example of the sort of dilemma many see confronting the AP.

A Window in, or a Megaphone Out? | From March 15, 2012 – April 13, 2012 [the KCNA and the AP held a joint photo exhibition](#), officially entitled “Window on North Korea,” at New York’s The 8th Floor art gallery. [According to reports](#), the exhibit featured “79 photographs, including shots from AP photographers, KCNA staffers and material from the KCNA archive.” Of the images available for view, none could be labeled as acknowledging North Korean violation of human rights, malnourishment, the inability—or unwillingness—to stop famine, and enriching weapons-grade uranium.

The images, even those of AP’s finest, like Asia-hand David Guttenfelder, seemingly refused to shade toward what many know to be the darker side of a country run by an oppressive regime. Given the limited access photographers who manage their way into North Korea are given, capturing shots of truly ordinary life is still left to the imagination of people who read Barbara Demick’s *Nothing to Envy*. As to why the KCNA photographer’s work never ventured into the slightest divergence from the standard fare of socialist paradise, one need hardly speculate.

The [event’s opening ceremony](#) included representatives from both the KCNA and the AP, in addition to the gallery’s co-founder, Donald Rubin, US citizens and members of the DPRK mission at the UN in New York. First Vice-Director General Kim Chang-Gwang led the KCNA delegation and Senior Vice President Kathleen Carroll and Vice President John Daniszewski represented the AP.

The event was held as part of [the agreement](#) to open an AP bureau in Pyongyang, the first Western news agency to establish a bureau in the North Korean capital city. [The AP press release](#) emphasizes the “uniqueness” of the images offered as a way of getting a “rare glimpse into a nation long shrouded from view,” the entire exhibition “designed to show what life is like in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea).”

The perspective of the event from Pyongyang, [as reported by the KCNA](#), was considerably different. Aside from incorrectly identifying the 8th Floor gallery as the Rubin Art Museum, the report in the KCNA also incorrectly identifies the “theme” of the exhibition as the “True Picture of Korea,” instead of the official title “Window on North Korea,” a mistake likely to be an intentional one. Why wouldn’t North Korea want the world to believe that everyone is well fed and smiling?

An Art Exhibition or Propaganda Coup? | In predictable fashion, the KCNA took full advantage of the opportunity to score as many propaganda points as possible, claiming that the photos depict the “undying revolutionary exploits” of the Kim paternal dynasty towards the “building of a thriving nation, people’s happiness, independent and peaceful reunification of Korea and global independence.” The most significant difference in this propaganda-spreading effort is that the KCNA was given the opportunity to project to a global-audience, rather than its typical domestic crowd—the North Korean people. The timing of the event, ending just

before the centennial of North Korea's "Eternal Leader" and founder, Kim Il-sung, clearly indicates that North Korea sought to use the occasion as an additional propaganda exploit, in addition to other things—like rocket launches that would ultimately fail.

Most notably, the KCNA report highlights Donald Rubin's congratulatory speech, particularly his "hope that the exhibition would be the first step towards cultural and political reconciliation," then noting Kim Chang Gwang's expectation that the exhibition, as a North Korean cultural export, would promote "mutual understanding between the peoples of the DPRK and the U.S. and improving the bilateral relations."

In other words: the North Korean government wants to use a visual form of cultural diplomacy to strengthen ties with the U.S. using its relationship with the AP to legitimize its efforts.

Trust Building or "Triumph?" | The North Korean government, given a rare opportunity to portray the country in a positive light, took full advantage of the opportunity to, perhaps paradoxically, use the event as a way to extend its soft-power—not something North Korea, a state only removed from the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2008, has had much luck doing in the 21st century.

If the critics are right, the joint AP-KCNA exhibition makes the AP Leni Riefenstahl and the exhibition itself a "Triumph of the Will" in still picture. Or is this rather instead like "ping-pong diplomacy" and, [as Santiago Lyon suggests](#), "a trust building exercise," leading towards the beginning of a new relationship between North Korea and the U.S.?

Either way, it seems that North Korea has the upper hand in the realm of photo-diplomacy. How DPRK will use its new-found leverage is not yet manifest. What AP has to gain is still as ethereal as an image.