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### International media coverage of North Korea: study of journalists and news reports on the six-party nuclear talks

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### International media coverage of North Korea: study of journalists and news reports on the six-party nuclear talks

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This study examines what factors influence journalists' perceived importance of different attributes of North Korea. In particular, this study analyzes the degree to which journalists' perceived credibility of their sources influences their perceptions of different attributes of North Korea, even after controlling for individual, organizational, and social-system factors. To examine these issues, this study conducts a survey of South Korean and Western journalists who covered North Korea and a content analysis of media reports on North Korea. The results show that the influence of factors at different levels can vary depending on the issues or aspects of issues that journalists deal with. In the case of North Korea issues, sources at the institutional level had significant influence on journalists' perceived importance of the *rogue state* dimension of North Korea. In comparison, journalists' nationality at the social-system level best predicted journalists' perceived importance of the *dialogue partner* dimension of North Korea.

**Keywords:** North Korea; six-party nuclear talks; news sources; journalists; media sociology; South Korea; the USA; Europe

#### Introduction

With North Korea's missile launch and nuclear test in 2006, followed by its agreement to disable all its nuclear facilities and the second inter-Korean summit in 2007, the isolationist North has grabbed attention from the media and the public for the past few years. Despite the significance of these events, journalists have faced major obstacles in reporting on North Korea mainly due to extremely limited access to the country (Kirk & Choe, 2006). While journalists have thus relied much on government officials or private experts for information on North Korea, they have often asked to themselves whether they are getting an 'accurate picture' of one of the world's most closed countries (CNN, 2006).

Journalists often handle uncertain and unexpected events, and how they deal with such issues is influenced by various factors at different levels (Donsbach, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Tuchman, 1974). In the case of international or diplomatic issues, studies showed that government officials have a major influence on how the media cover related events (Bennett, 1990; Berry, 1990; Cohen, 1963; Entman, 2004; Graber, 2006; Herman, 1993; Malek & Wiegand, 1997; Seib, 1997). However, characteristics of individual journalists and situations in their

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media organizations can also be important forces that affect journalists' reporting on international events (Chang & Lee, 1992; Donsbach, 2004; Fahmy & Johnson, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

This study analyzes what factors influence journalists' perceptions of the attributes of North Korea, such as military threat, human rights abuse, and being open to peaceful dialogue. The focus of this study's analysis is the media coverage of the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The multilateral nuclear talks offer a valuable chance to examine those issues because it involves six different countries with different stakes in the talks: the two Koreas, the USA, China, Japan, and Russia. Moreover, media reports on the issue have been regularly produced for the last 5 years, as there have been a total of 12 gatherings since the start of the talks in August 2003.

A survey of journalists who covered the six-party talks and a content analysis of media coverage of the talks comprise the major elements of this study. Ninety journalists participated in the survey, including 45 South Korean journalists and 50 Western journalists. The content analysis examines South Korean and US newspaper reports on the six-party talks.

This study advances research on media sociology by examining factors that influence journalists' coverage of North Korea issues. This study also contributes to research on international and foreign affairs issues based on its comparative approach to the multilateral talks concerning North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Ultimately, the current study will help explain broader issues regarding media coverage of isolationist North Korea, other crisis states, and foreign affairs issues in general. Examining these issues is important, as studies have shown that the media have a significant impact on people's perceptions of international issues (Graber, 2006; Shoemaker, Wang, Seo, & Johnson, 2008; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

## **Theory and hypotheses**

### ***Influences on media coverage***

Many scholars have investigated the factors that influence how journalists cover certain news events, in attempts to enhance our understanding of the production of news stories (e.g., Donsbach, 2004; Fahmy & Johnson, 2005; Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Starck & Soloski, 1997). Understanding this area, however, remains a major challenge, as it involves diverse factors acting at different levels. For example, a journalist's decision of whether and how to cover famine in Africa will depend not only on the journalist's judgment of the newsworthiness of the event but also on his or her news organization's perspectives on the issue. Further, the journalist's judgment of the event itself is affected by the sources that provide relevant information as well as by the cultures or social structures that the journalist lives in.

Despite the complexity of studying these processes, some systematic approaches have helped us better understand their central issues. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) classify factors influencing journalists' news decisions into five levels: the individual level, media-routine level, organizational level, social-institution level, and social-system level. The individual level of analysis involves the characteristics of individual people; the routine level is concerned with general patterns of communication work; the organizational level looks at the characteristics of organizations; the social and

institutional level examines forces outside of media organizations such as governments and advertisers; and the social-system level accounts for social structures, ideologies, and cultures (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This framework has served as a useful mechanism for analyzing the forces that influence the media coverage of news events (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Bissell, 2000; Fahmy & Johnson, 2005; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003).

Donsbach (2004) presents different categories in his approach of this topic. He identified four main areas that have been examined in research on journalists' news decisions. They are news factors, institutional objectives, the manipulative power of sources, and the subjective beliefs of journalists. News factors are journalists' professional assessment of 'the characteristics that make a story worth reporting' (Donsbach, 2004, p. 134). Institutional objectives are what professional work (and how) journalists are expected to do for their media organizations. The manipulative power of news sources is the influence of sources on journalists' decisions about whether and how to cover certain news events. The subjective beliefs of journalists concern how journalists' perspectives, ideology, and political orientation influence their news coverage. Therefore, Donsbach agrees with Shoemaker and Reese (1996) that there are different layers of forces that affect how journalists do their jobs. In particular, it can be argued that Donsbach's institutional objectives belong to the organizational level, the manipulative power of news sources to the social-institution level, and subjective beliefs of journalists to the individual level.

The present study examines factors at four levels that influence journalists' news decisions: individual, organizational, social institution, and social system. Forces analyzed at the individual level include journalists' political orientation relative to North Korea issues and their experience of covering North Korea. The organizational-level analysis examines how the political orientations of media organizations relative to North Korea issues influence journalists' coverage of North Korea. At the social-institution level, this study focuses on sources, as reporters depended a great deal on government sources in reporting on the six-party talks due to their limited access to the negotiations. Finally, journalists' nationality is examined at the social-system level. As the main focus of the study is to examine the influence of news sources on journalists' news decisions, the source-journalist relationship is examined in a greater detail and is followed by an overview of the influence of the other factors.

### *Source-journalist relationship*

Sources and journalists benefit from a mutual relationship in that journalists give sources access to target audiences and sources provide credible information to journalists. In the news-making process, sources are 'the actors whom journalists observe or interview, including interviewees who appear on air or who are quoted' (Gans, 1979, p. 80). Among the various types of sources, those with economic and political power get easier access to the media and thus have a greater chance of having their agenda heard (Gans, 1979). In particular, the media rely heavily on government officials who have been regarded as 'legitimate spokesperson[s]' (Ettema, Whitney, & Wackman, 1997, p. 38). Noting the tendency of the media to rely on powerful sources, Reese claimed: 'News is what authorities and other elites say it is' (1997, p. 425).

In discussing the relationship between journalists and news sources, it is important to note that journalistic objectivity plays an important part in journalists'

use of sources in their presentation of news. Journalists are regarded as objective when they let high-profile sources dictate the news, whereas journalists are viewed as biased if they come up with conclusions based on their own expertise (Reese, 1997, p. 426). Given the norm of objectivity, journalists need to confirm the credibility of sources used in their coverage. For this reason, source credibility has been regarded as one of the most important factors that influence journalists' source choice (Flynn, 2002; McComas & Trumbo, 2001; Powers & Fico, 1994). According to Meyer (1988), the credibility of a source depends on whether the source is fair, is unbiased, tells the whole story, is accurate, and can be trusted. Thus, Meyer's Credibility Index measures fairness, bias, accuracy, trustworthiness, and comprehensiveness. Flynn (2002) adopted Meyer's Credibility Index in analyzing environmental journalists' perception of the credibility of environmental groups as sources on global warming issues. Through a self-administered survey of environmental journalists in the USA, Flynn found that source credibility affects the perceived choice of sources by journalists. Powers and Fico (1994) also found that journalists' selection of sources was influenced by how credible the sources were.

Thus, it can be argued that journalists quote sources that they deem credible, and thus the frames and agenda suggested by those credible sources are likely to affect how journalists report on certain issues (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). That is, journalists' coverage of news events reflects the perspectives of sources who the journalists perceive to be credible. This is why Donsbach (2004) mentions the manipulative power of news sources as an influential factor on journalists' news decisions, and Shoemaker and Reese (1996) discuss the influence of sources as an important force at the social-institution level.

### *Interplay of other factors*

As noted above, there are numerous factors that affect journalists' news decisions other than news sources. First, journalists' individual characteristics can influence their coverage of certain issues. Factors at the individual level include journalists' personalities, values, religions, experiences, attitudes, and role conceptions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In particular, studies showed that journalists' political orientation and professional experience influence how they cover certain issues. Bissell found that photographic gatekeepers' decisions were influenced by their political preferences, as well as their perceptions of audience expectations and personal opinion about explicitness (2000, p. 90). Based on a nationwide survey of news editors, Chang and Lee (1992) found that the political ideology and professional experience of the editors were significant factors in their selection of international news. Fahmy and Johnson's (2005) survey of 159 embedded journalists covering the Iraq war showed that individual level factors such as individual values and professional norms were more influential on embedded reports than extra-media factors.

Second, characteristics of an individual news organization can affect journalists' news decisions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Some studies suggest that journalists become socialized to their employing media organization's political ideology and way of thinking as they adjust to their work environment (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). Gans (1979) also argues that media coverage of certain issues can be affected more by organizational goals than factors at the individual and routine level. In particular, whether a media organization

selects or rejects a certain news item and how it decides to cover it can be influenced by the media organization's own norms or political stance. For example, when international tension was high over cartoons of the Islamic prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper in 2005, news organizations made different decisions on whether to reprint the cartoons that lampooned Muhammad and thus angered the Islamic world (Bright, 2006).

Last, it is important to examine how different social systems or cultures influence journalists' news decisions. In this study, nationality is used as a proxy for social, cultural, and ideological influences on journalists, as nationality has accounted for much variance in cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 1980, 2004). In the communication field, studies have examined how national contexts affect media messages (e.g., Hachten & Hachten, 1999; Head, 1985; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). In particular, Donsbach and Patterson (2004) emphasized the importance of comparative study in examining journalists' news decisions. They argued that any research on factors influencing journalists will fall short of fully 'accomplishing its goals' if the study is based on one particular country without considering other countries (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004, p. 251). Donsbach and Patterson's (2004) survey of journalists in five countries (Germany, the UK, Italy, Sweden, and the USA) showed differences among the journalists of the different countries in their news decisions and role conceptions. They found that US journalists were the most distinctive among the journalists in the five countries. According to their survey, US journalists were the most aggressive in their fights for a free press and had the highest degree of perceived separation among the work of the reporter, the editor, and the editorial commentators. In particular, US journalists showed the greatest interest in influencing politics, but they pursue this goal not by advocating particular values and ideas but by 'digging out relevant information through their own research' (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004, p. 264). Donsbach and Patterson's study also found that journalists in all five countries were 'motivated primarily by the task of gathering and disseminating information about current public development' (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004, p. 263). Therefore, we can assume that examining the work of journalists from different countries who covered the six-party talks will show differences in their perceptions of attributes of North Korea and news sources.

### ***Hypotheses***

As discussed above, previous studies showed that characteristics of individual journalists and their organizations, as well as sources, influence how journalists do their job (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Fahmy & Johnson, 2005; Flynn, 2002; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; Powers & Fico, 1994; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker et al., 2001). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed to test the relationships among journalists' perceptions of North Korea, the characteristics of individual journalists and their news organizations, journalists' nationality, and journalists' perceived source credibility. Each hypothesis is tested twice: once for each dependent variable. The first dependent variable is journalists' perceptions of North Korea as a *rogue state*, and the second is their perceptions of North Korea as a *dialogue partner*. The order of entry of independent variables (characteristics of individual journalists, characteristics of their news organizations, journalists' nationality, and sources) is determined based on the purpose of this study. The

main concern of the study is whether sources are significant predictors of journalists' perceptions of North Korea, even when controlling for characteristics of individual journalists and their news organizations and journalists' nationality.

*H1.* Journalists' individual characteristics – political stance on North Korea and journalistic experience – influences their perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state (or dialogue partner).

*H2.* The political stance of journalists' news organization influences their perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state (or dialogue partner), even when controlling for journalists' individual characteristics.

*H3.* Journalists' nationality influences their perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state (or dialogue partner), even when controlling for their individual characteristics and the political stance of their news organization.

*H4.* Journalists' perceived source credibility influences their perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state (or dialogue partner), even when controlling for their individual characteristics, the political stance of their news organization, and their nationality.

## Methods

This study includes a survey of South Korean and Western journalists who covered the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear ambitions as well as a content analysis of media reports on the multilateral talks. An Internet survey was conducted during March and April 2007 to measure journalists' perceptions of North Korea and of source credibility, as well as characteristics of themselves and their media organizations. Content analysis examined how the US and South Korean newspapers covered the crucial nuclear talks, focusing in particular on what attributes of North Korea they emphasized.

## Survey

The target population of the survey was a group of South Korean and Western journalists who covered at least one round of the six-party talks, an ongoing process that began in August 2003. In the case of Western journalists, this study targeted US and European journalists. As a participant in the six-party talks, the USA had a high stake in the talks with North Korea compared to the other countries. Europe has engaged in North Korea issues, particularly human rights issues, even though it is not a direct participant of the talks.

The study came up with a list of 152 South Korean journalists who covered the six-party talks between 2003 and 2007. The journalists were mainly those who covered the Foreign Ministry and Unification Ministry in South Korea that deal with issues involving North Korea. To identify US journalists who reported on the six-party talks during the period, US news articles were searched through the online database Lexis-Nexis. The search yielded a list of 73 US journalists representing a variety of media organizations. E-mail addresses for the South Korean and US journalists were obtained from the public relations departments of their media organizations. European journalists were contacted through the Foreign Correspondents Club of China. The journalists' organization forwarded the researcher's recruitment e-mail to its members, so the exact number of European journalists contacted is not available.

The questionnaire was sent out through a professional online survey website. An Internet survey was appropriate for this study because the target journalists worked in different countries such as the USA, South Korea, China, and Russia. Before the questionnaire was sent to the target journalists, a pretest was conducted with three South Korean journalists and two US journalists. Based on the feedback from the five journalists, some changes were made to the original questionnaire to clarify some of the questions. Finally, personalized recruitment e-mails were sent to the target journalists encouraging them to participate in the anonymous and confidential survey.

## ***Content analysis***

### ***Sampling***

The study conducted a content analysis of two newspapers each from the USA and South Korea to identify attributes of North Korea and sources used in media reports on the six-party talks. The newspapers are the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* of the USA, and the *Chosun Ilbo* and the *JoongAng Ilbo* of South Korea. The newspapers were selected because they are leading media outlets in the countries and offer especially in-depth coverage of international issues (Golan, 2006; Media Today, 2007; Sparrow, 1999).

The study examined news reports published during the time period of 7 days before through 7 days after each round of the nuclear talks. This time frame was selected based on the fact that newspapers ran stories related to the talks several days before and after each round of the talks. Therefore, the search periods were: 20 August–5 September 2003 (first round), 18 February–6 March 2004 (second round), 16 June–1 July 2004 (third round), 19 July–14 August 2005 (fourth round/first phase), 6–26 September 2005 (fourth round/second phase), 2–18 November 2005 (fifth round/first phase), 11–29 December 2006 (fifth round/second phase), 1–20 February 2007 (fifth round/third phase), and 12–29 March 2007 (sixth round/first phase).

The online database Lexis-Nexis and the Korean Integrated News Database System (KINDS) were used to search US and South Korean news articles, respectively. As the *JoongAng Ilbo* does not share its content with KINDS, the newspaper's website was used to retrieve its articles. The search terms were 'North Korea' and 'six-party talks.' A total of 142 US news stories and 270 South Korean articles were identified through the searches.

### ***Coding instrument***

The unit of analysis in coding attributes was the paragraph, which is widely regarded as the smallest unit of meaning in newspaper journalism (Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998). Seven attributes of North Korea were developed from a preliminary analysis of the news stories under research, alongside previous studies that examined attributes of North Korea emphasized in the media (Seo & Lim, 2007). In addition, the five journalists who participated in the pretest of the survey provided useful input in developing the attributes. The seven attributes were military threat, human rights abuse, illicit economic activities, 'axis-of-evil' nation, rule by Kim Jong-il, openness to peaceful negotiations, and being an essential part of any peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. The military threat attribute concerns North



Korea's pursuit or exports of missile technology and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that include nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. The attribute of human rights abuse is related to North Korean leaders' suppression of their people, North Korea's abductions of foreigners, and the hardships faced by North Korean defectors. The attribute of illicit economic activities covers North Korean money laundering and counterfeiting of US currency. This attribute also concerns exports of drugs and narcotics, and smuggling operations, aimed at bringing hard currency to North Korea's moribund economy. The 'evil nation' attribute covers the reference to North Korea as an 'axis-of-evil' state, which was originally made during President George W. Bush's State of the Union address in 2002. The attribute also covers North Korea's alleged links to terrorism. The openness to peaceful dialogue attribute is about North Korea's readiness to engage in dialogue with the international community. The attribute of North Korea being an essential part of any peace regime on the Korean Peninsula relates to the discussion of unification between the two Koreas, and replacing the current 1953 armistice with a formal peace treaty.

The study also identified what sources were used for the newspapers to mention those attributes. The sources were classified into 17 categories: US officials, US private experts, US media, South Korean officials, South Korean private experts, South Korean media, Chinese officials, Chinese private experts, Chinese media, Japanese officials, Japanese private experts, Japanese media, Russian officials, Russian private experts, Russian media, North Korean officials, and North Korean media. North Korean experts do not constitute one separate category because experts in the Communist country rarely speak to the foreign media.

### *Intercoder reliability*

Two graduate students majoring in mass communication were trained in concepts of the study and coding categories. Then, each student coded the same 10% of the total 412 articles to check levels of agreement between the two independent coders in coding sources and attributes. Intercoder reliability was determined by Scott's *pi*, and the value was .98 in coding sources and .83 in coding attributes of North Korea.

### *Variables*

#### *Dependent variable: rogue state vs. dialogue partner*

The dependent variable was journalists' perceptions of North Korea. Journalists were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert-type scale how important they perceived each of the seven attributes of North Korea to be when reporting on the six-party talks. Based on Principle Axis Factoring (PAF) with varimax rotation, two factors were extracted. The first factor had high loadings from five negative attributes of North Korea: military threat, human rights abuse, illicit economic activities, 'axis-of-evil' nation, and rule by Kim Jong-il. The second factor had high loadings from two attributes related to North Korea's readiness to or importance regarding peaceful talks: openness to peaceful negotiations, and being an essential part of any peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Considering operational definitions of the attributes identified in the content analysis, the first factor was identified as a perception of North Korea as a *rogue state* and the second factor a perception of North Korea as a

*dialogue partner*. Cronbach's alpha was .78 for the rogue state dimension, and it was .75 for the dialogue partner dimension. Then, a composite index was created for the rogue state dimension by calculating the mean of the five attributes factored together: military threat, human rights abuse, illicit economic activities, 'axis-of-evil' nation-status, and rule by Kim Jong-il. The dialogue partner dimension was created by calculating the mean of two attributes factored together: openness to peaceful negotiations, and being an essential part of any peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

#### *Independent variable: news source variable*

Another PAF factor analysis was conducted on the 17 source categories. The respondents were provided with the list of 17 sources and asked to indicate on a five-point scale how credible they perceived each source to be in reporting on the six-party talks. Three factors were extracted from the items. The factors were named based on what aspects of North Korea the source items loading highly on each factor emphasized according to the content analysis of the US and South Korean newspapers and previous studies on the six-party talks (Blank, 2007; Harrison, 2005; Huntley, 2005). The first source factor including Russian officials and Russian experts took a neutral stance, so they are named *middle-ground sources*. The second source factor including South Korean and Chinese officials gave a relatively greater emphasis on attributes related to the dialogue partner dimension; thus, they are named *dialogue-partner sources*. The third source factor including US and Japanese officials emphasized attributes related to the rogue state dimension; thus, they are named *rogue-state sources*. The scales were reliable as Cronbach's alpha for the dimension of rogue-state sources, the dimension of dialogue-partner sources, and the dimension of middle-ground sources was .76, .80, and .77, respectively. Then, composite indices were created for the three source dimensions by calculating the mean of the source types factored together.

#### *Other independent variables*

The other independent variables include their journalistic experience, the political orientation of themselves and their media organizations, and their nationality. Journalists' experience in covering North Korea was measured by how many rounds of the nuclear talks they had covered. To measure the political orientation of journalists themselves and their media organizations, they were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert-type scale how conservative or liberal they or their media organizations were on issues involving North Korea. Finally, the journalists indicated their nationality, whether they were from the USA, South Korea, or Europe.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics from the survey*

A total of 109 journalists participated in the survey, but 19 of them were dropped from the final analysis because their questionnaires were incomplete. Therefore, responses from 90 journalists were used for this study, including 45 South Korean journalists and 50 Western journalists (24 US journalists and 21 European

journalists). The response rate was 29.6% and 32.8% for South Korean journalists and US journalists, respectively. The response rate for the European journalists was not available, as the researcher was unable to ascertain the total number of European journalists who were initially contacted through the foreign correspondents' club in China. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants.

A majority of the journalists have much experience in covering the six-party talks and North Korea, as over 65% of them said they had reported on three or more rounds of the six-party talks ( $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=2.05$ ). Also, around 40% of them regarded themselves as diplomatic correspondents. In regard to their area of work in journalism, 55.6% work for newspapers, 18.9% for television, 17.8% for wire service, and 4.4% for radio. On the matter of their political orientation relative to North Korea, 45.5% of the participants said they were liberal on North Korean issues, 42.2% said they were neutral on North Korean issues, and 12.2% said they were conservative ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=.77$ ). When asked about their media organization's political orientation relative to North Korea, 62.2% said their organizations were neutral on North Korea issues, 18.9% said their media organizations were liberal, and 18.8% said their media organizations were conservative ( $M=2.98$ ,  $SD=.76$ ).

Table 1. Characteristics of journalists who participated in the survey.

Variable	Values	S. Korea ( <i>N</i> =45)	USA ( <i>N</i> =24)	European ( <i>N</i> =21)	Total ( <i>N</i> =90)
Number of talks journalist covered	One or two	42.2%	33.4%	19.0%	34.5%
	Three or four	42.2	20.8	38.1	35.6
	Five or six	6.6	29.1	23.8	16.7
	Seven or eight	8.9	16.6	19.0	13.4
	Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Political orientation of journalists	Very conservative	0%	4.2%	0%	1.1%
	Somewhat conservative	13.3	16.7	0	11.1
	Neutral	31.1	54.2	52.4	42.2
	Somewhat liberal	51.1	25.0	42.9	42.2
	Very liberal	4.4	0	4.8	3.3
	Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Political orientation of media organizations	Very conservative	6.7%	4.2%	0%	4.4%
	Somewhat conservative	17.8	16.7	4.8	14.4
	Neutral	53.3	79.2	61.9	62.2
	Somewhat liberal	17.8	0	33.3	16.7
	Very liberal	4.4	0	0	2.2
	Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Area of work	Newspaper	57.8%	54.2%	52.4%	55.6%
	Television	20.0	12.5	23.8	18.9
	Wire service	17.8	20.8	14.3	17.8
	Radio	8.3	0	9.5	4.4
	Magazine	0	4.2	0	1.1
	Online	4.4	0	0	2.2
	Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

In regard to attributes of North Korea, the journalists said military threat ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) is the most important attribute in their coverage of the country, followed by being essential part of peace regime in Korea ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), being open to peaceful dialogue ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), being ruled by Kim ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), illicit economic activities ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = .96$ ), and human rights abuses ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). The least important one was the attribute of an 'axis-of-evil' nation ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). When it comes to journalists' perceptions of sources involved in the six-party talks, US government officials received the highest credibility ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .74$ ), followed by South Korean government officials ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = .79$ ), US experts ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .81$ ), and US media ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .65$ ). In comparison, Russian media ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) and Russian experts ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) were the least credible sources for them. In between the two groups were South Korean experts ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = .77$ ), Chinese officials ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), Japanese officials ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), Japanese media ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .79$ ), Japanese experts ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .84$ ), South Korean media ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = .68$ ), North Korean officials ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), Russian officials ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), Chinese experts ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = .87$ ), Chinese media ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = .92$ ), and North Korean media ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

### *Descriptive statistics from content analysis*

When it comes to media coverage of the six-party talks, the seven attributes of North Korea appeared 1625 times in the US newspapers and 2293 times in the South Korean newspapers. There was not much difference between the two sides, even though the chi-square probability was smaller than .05. The most dominant attribute in both countries was the military threat attribute, with 73.4% for the US newspapers and 66.7% for the South Korean newspapers. As North Korea's nuclear ambition is the main focus of the six-party talks, both the US and the South Korean newspapers most often discussed the North's activities regarding its nuclear weapons development. The second most commonly mentioned attribute of North Korea in the US and the South Korean media was the open to peaceful dialogue attribute, though to a different degree. The proportion of the attribute in the US newspapers was 7.3%, compared to 11.6% in the South Korean newspapers. However, the third most dominant attribute in the US newspapers was the human rights abuse attribute (6.7%), while it was the essential part of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula attribute (9.1%) in the South Korean newspapers. Therefore, the US newspapers emphasized the North Korean leaders' suppression of their people or North Korea's abductions of foreigners, whereas the South Korean newspapers focused more on discussing the nuclear issue in the broader context of Korean unification and peace in Northeast Asia.

### *Hypothesis testing*

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the four hypotheses by entering the four groups of independent variables into the regression model block by block: journalists' political stance and professional experience at the individual level; the political stance of their news organization at the organizational level; journalists' nationality at the social-system level; and journalists' perceived credibility of their

sources at the social-institution level. Table 2 summarizes the results of the regression analyses.

Hypothesis 1 posits that journalists' individual characteristics can predict their perceptions of the importance of the rogue state or dialogue partner dimension of North Korea. Hypothesis 1 is supported for journalists' perceived importance of the rogue state dimension of North Korea ( $R^2$  change = .16,  $F$  change = 7.93,  $df$  = [2, 86],  $p \leq .001$ ) but not for journalists' perceived importance of the dialogue partner dimension ( $R^2$  change = .06,  $F$  change = 2.97,  $df$  = [2, 87],  $p = .06$ ). Journalists' individual characteristics explain 16% of the total variance of journalists' perceived importance of North Korea as a rogue state. Of the two variables at the individual level, journalists' political orientation showed a statistically significant correlation with journalists' perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state and a dialogue partner. The study found that the more liberal journalists are the less important they find the rogue state dimension of North Korea ( $\beta = -.40$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) and the more important they find the dialogue partner dimension of North Korea ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ).

Hypothesis 2 suggests that the political orientation toward North Korea of journalists' media organizations can predict journalists' perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state or dialogue partner, even when controlling for their individual characteristics. This hypothesis was not supported in regard to either the rogue state dimension ( $R^2$  change = .01,  $F$  change = .99,  $df$  = [1, 85],  $p = .32$ ) or the dialogue

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors of journalists' perceptions of the importance of the rogue state and dialogue partner dimension of North Korea.

Model	Level	Variables	Rogue state		Dialogue partner	
			$\beta$	$\Delta$	$B$	$\Delta$
1	Individual	Political orientation	-.40c	.16c	.24a	.06
		Journalistic experience	.01		-.12	
2	Individual	Political orientation	-.34b	.01	.29	.01
		Journalistic experience	.00		-.12	
	Organizational	Organization's political stance	-.11		-.11	
3	Individual	Political orientation	-.33b	.02	.17	.17c
		Journalistic experience	.03		-.00	
	Organizational	Organization's political stance	-.15		-.06	
		Nationality (South Korea)	-.05		.50c	
		Nationality (Europe)	.12		.11	
4	Individual	Political orientation	-.21	.14b	.17	.01
		Journalistic experience	.02		.02	
	Organizational	Organization's political stance	-.12		-.03	
		Nationality (South Korea)	-.02		.57c	
	Social system	Nationality (Europe)	.12		.12	
		Rogue-state sources	.25a		.07	
		Dialogue-partner sources	-.37c		.06	
		Middle-ground sources	-.13		-.09	

Note: a =  $p \leq .05$ ; b =  $p \leq .01$ ; c =  $p \leq .001$ .

partner dimension ( $R^2$  change = .01,  $F$  change = .79,  $df$  = [1, 86],  $p$  = .38). Therefore, journalists' perceptions of North Korea are not significantly affected by their media organization's stance on North Korea when controlling for their individual characteristics.

Hypothesis 3 posits that journalists' nationality will predict their perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state or as a dialogue partner, even when controlling for their individual characteristics and their media organizations' political orientation toward North Korean issues. This hypothesis is supported for journalists' perceived importance of the dialogue partner dimension of North Korea ( $R^2$  change = .17,  $F$  change = 9.64,  $df$  = [2, 84],  $p$  ≤ .001) but not for journalists' perceived importance of the rogue state dimension ( $R^2$  change = .02,  $F$  change = 1.09,  $df$  = [2, 83],  $p$  = .34). Journalists' nationality explains 17% of the total variance of journalists' perceived importance of North Korea as dialogue partner. In particular, South Korean journalists believed the dialogue partner dimension to be important to a greater extent than their US and European counterparts ( $\beta$  = .50,  $p$  ≤ .001).

Finally, Hypothesis 4 suggests that journalists' perceived credibility of sources predicts their perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state or as a dialogue partner, even when controlling for their individual characteristics, their media organizations' political orientation toward North Korean issues, and journalists' nationality. This hypothesis is supported for journalists' perceived importance of the rogue state dimension of North Korea ( $R^2$  change = .14,  $F$  change = 5.51,  $df$  = [3, 80],  $p$  ≤ .01) but not for journalists' perceived importance of the dialogue partner dimension ( $R^2$  change = .01,  $F$  change = .36,  $df$  = [3, 81],  $p$  = .78). Journalists' perceived source credibility explains 14% of the total variance of journalists' perceived importance of North Korea as rogue state. The study found that the more credible journalists perceive sources emphasizing the rogue state dimension of North Korea are, the more important they believe this dimension is ( $\beta$  = .25,  $p$  ≤ .05). In comparison, the more credible journalists perceive sources emphasizing the dialogue partner dimension of North Korea, the less important they believe the rogue state dimension is ( $\beta$  = -.37,  $p$  ≤ .001).

## Discussion

The study examined relationships among journalists' perceptions of important attributes of North Korea, their individual characteristics, their media organizations' political stances relative to North Korea, their nationality, and their perceptions of source credibility. In particular, this study analyzed whether journalists' perceived credibility of sources used in their reporting on North Korea influences their perceptions of the importance of different attributes of North Korea even when controlling for the characteristics of individual journalists and their media organizations, and journalists' nationality. In analyzing these issues, the study used data from a cross-sectional Internet survey of 90 journalists who covered the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear ambitions. South Korean and US newspaper reports on the talks were also analyzed.

The findings indicate that issue and valence may determine forces at what levels influence how journalists cover certain events or topics. In this study, sources at the social institution level had significant influence on journalists' perception of the importance of North Korea's rogue state dimension, which represents negative

aspects of North Korea. In comparison, there was no significant relationship between journalists' perception of source credibility and their perceptions of North Korea as a dialogue partner, which represents neutral aspects of North Korea. Instead, journalists' nationality at the social-institution level best predicted journalists' perception of the importance of the dialogue partner dimension of North Korea. As noted above, journalists are likely to quote sources that they deem credible, and the frames and agenda those credible sources use influence how journalists cover news events (Flynn, 2002; McComas & Trumbo, 2001; Powers & Fico, 1994; Reese, 1997). This study indicates, however, that the influence of sources is contingent upon aspects of the news issues. This finding is significant because most previous studies on factors influencing journalists' news decisions have not considered positive, neutral, or negative aspects of news events. By categorizing the seven attributes of North Korea as negative and neutral dimensions based on factor analyses, this study presents more specific evidence of how journalists are influenced by factors at the individual, organizational, social-institution, and social-system levels.

It is also important to acknowledge that this study is consistent with earlier studies that showed sources have a major influence on the media's coverage of news events, particularly foreign affairs issues (Bennett, 1990; Berry, 1990; Cohen, 1963; Entman, 2004; Graber, 2006; Herman, 1993; Malek & Wiegand, 1997; Seib, 1997). This study classified different sources into three categories: sources emphasizing the rogue state dimension, sources emphasizing the dialogue partner dimension, and sources taking a neutral stance. Such categorization enabled this study to show how different types of sources influence journalists' perceptions of North Korea. The significant influence of sources on journalists' perceptions of the rogue state dimension of North Korea raises concerns that journalists can become vulnerable to the deliberate influence of governments with an agenda. During the six-party talks, US and Japanese government officials and private experts placed a greater relative emphasis on the rogue state dimension of North Korea, focusing on North Korea's nuclear threats, human rights abuse, and illicit economic activities. In comparison, South Korean and Chinese government officials stressed the dialogue partner aspect of North Korea, urging Washington to engage in direct talks with Pyongyang.

It is also interesting to note that nationality was the only predictor for journalists' perceptions regarding the importance of the dialogue dimension of North Korea. This indicates that nationality overrides the other studied factors when it comes to predicting journalists' views of North Korea as a dialogue partner. South Korean journalists believed it was important to emphasize attributes related to the dialogue partner dimension in reporting on North Korea issues to a greater extent than US and European journalists. This can be explained by the context of the historical and political situation of South Korea. South Korea has remained divided from North Korea for more than half a century, so South Koreans believe it is important to pursue reconciliation with North Korea by accepting it as a dialogue partner (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2005). Also, for the last several years, South Korean governments have pursued a policy of engaging North Korea. In comparison, the Bush administration has largely taken a hardline stance toward North Korea. As this study tested the effect of nationality while controlling for several other factors, it is more convincing than other previous studies that examined only nationality in explaining how journalists of different countries work.

There are some other interesting findings in this study. Journalists' political orientation showed a significant correlation with journalists' perceptions of North Korea as a rogue state and as a dialogue partner. The more conservative journalists are, the more important they believe the rogue state dimension to be, and the less important they believe the dialogue partner dimension to be. This seems to be in line with discussions in both South Korea and the USA indicating that conservatives want a tougher stance on North Korea whereas liberals want more engagement with the country. In comparison, journalists' work experience did not show a significant relationship with their perceptions of North Korea issues. Though previous studies showed that journalists' work experience can influence how they do their jobs, such influence may vary according to news topics. In the case of North Korea issues, journalists have very limited access to the country and thus mainly depend on government sources for relevant information, regardless of how long they have covered North Korea issues. Therefore, their experience of covering North Korea will not have much influence on their perceptions of the importance of attributes of North Korea.

This study has its limitations, of course. Most of all, the sample size for the survey is relatively small. This limitation was inherent to the study, as the number of journalists who covered the six-party talks in wide-audience national publications is small. However, it would be useful to expand this study by surveying journalists from the other countries that participated in the talks: China, Japan, and Russia. In the same vein, it would be useful to include a content analysis of media reports from these countries.

Overall, this study contributes to research on media sociology by examining factors at different levels that influence journalists' coverage of North Korea issues. This study also advances research on international issues based on its comparative approach to the multilateral talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons development. Future studies should examine news reports from diverse media outlets and other cases of international significance to provide a more generalizable approach to the issues of journalistic perceptions and the relations between perceptions and reporting practices.

### Notes on contributors

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