The New York Times

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# The Internet Black Hole That Is North Korea

By TOM ZELLER Jr. OCT. 23, 2006

THE tragically backward, sometimes absurdist hallmarks of North Korea and its leader, Kim Jong-il, are well known. There is Mr. Kim's Elton John eyeglasses and strangely whipped, cotton-candy hairdo. And there is the North Korean "No! Yeeesssss ... No! O.K. Fear the tiger!" school of diplomacy.

A newer, more dangerous sort of North Korean eccentricity registered around 4.0 on the Richter scale earlier this month — a nuclear weapon test that has had the world's major powers scrambling, right up through last week, to develop a policy script that would account for Mr. Kim's new toy.

But whatever the threat — and however lush the celebrations broadcast on state-controlled television from the streets of Pyongyang in the days afterward — the stark realities of life in North Korea were perhaps most evident in a simple satellite image over the shoulder of Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld during an Oct. 11 briefing. The image showed the two Koreas — North and South — photographed at night.

The South was illuminated from coast to coast, suggesting that not just lights, but that other, arguably more bedrock utility of the modern age — information — was pulsating through the population.

The North was black.

This is an impoverished country where televisions and radios are hard-wired to receive only government-controlled frequencies. Cellphones were banned outright in 2004. In May, the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York ranked North Korea No. 1 — over also-rans like Burma, Syria and Uzbekistan — on its list of the "10 Most Censored Countries."

That would seem to leave the question of Internet access in North Korea moot.

At a time when much of the world takes for granted a fat and growing network of digitized human knowledge, art, history, thought and debate, it is easy to forget just how much is being denied the people who live under the veil of darkness revealed in that satellite photograph.

While other restrictive regimes have sought to find ways to limit the Internet — through filters and blocks and threats — North Korea has chosen to stay wholly off the grid.

Julien Pain, head of the Internet desk at Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based group which tracks censorship around the world, put it more bluntly. "It is by far the worst Internet black hole," he said.

That is not to say that North Korean officials are not aware of the Internet.

As far back as 2000, at the conclusion of a visit to Pyongyang, Madeleine K. Albright, then secretary of state, bid Mr. Kim to "pick up the telephone any time," to which the North Korean leader replied, "Please give me your e-mail address." That signaled to everyone that at least he, if not the average North Korean, was cybersavvy. (It is unclear if Ms. Albright obliged.)

These days, the designated North Korean domain suffix, ".kp" remains dormant, but several "official" North Korean sites can be found delivering sweet nothings about the country and its leader to the global conversation (an example: www.kcckp.net/en/) — although these are typically hosted on servers in China or Japan.

Mr. Kim, embracing the concept of "distance learning," has established the Kim Il-sung Open University Web site, www.ournation-school.com — aimed at educating the world on North Korea's philosophy of "juche" or self-reliance. And the official North Korean news agency, at www.kcna.co.jp, provides tea leaves that are required reading for anyone following the great Quixote in the current nuclear crisis.

But to the extent that students and researchers at universities and a few other lucky souls have access to computers, these are linked only to each other — that is, to a nationwide, closely-monitored Intranet — according to the OpenNet Initiative, a human rights project linking researchers from the University of Toronto, Harvard Law School and Cambridge and Oxford Universities in Britain.

A handful of elites have access to the wider Web — via a pipeline through China — but this is almost certainly filtered, monitored and logged.

Some small "information technology stores" — crude cybercafes — have also cropped up. But these, too, connect only to the country's closed network. According to The Daily NK, a pro-democracy news site based in South Korea, computer classes at one such store cost more than six months wages for the average North Korean (snipurl.com/DailyNK). The store, located in Chungjin, North Korea, has its own generator to keep the computers running if the power is cut, The Daily NK site said.

"It's one thing for authoritarian regimes like China to try to blend the economic catalyst of access to the Internet with controls designed to sand off the rough edges, forcing citizens to make a little extra effort to see or create sensitive content," said Jonathan Zittrain, a professor of Internet governance and regulation at Oxford.

The problem is much more vexing for North Korea, Professor Zittrain said, because its “comprehensive official fantasy worldview” must remain inviolate. “In such a situation, any information leakage from the outside world could be devastating,” he said, “and Internet access for the citizenry would have to be so controlled as to be useless. It couldn’t even resemble the Internet as we know it.”

But how long can North Korea’s leadership keep the country in the dark?

Writing in The International Herald Tribune last year, Rebecca MacKinnon, a research fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, suggested that North Korea’s ban on cellphones was being breached on the black market along China’s border. And as more and more cellphones there become Web-enabled, she suggested, that might mean that a growing number of North Koreans, in addition to talking to family in the South, would be quietly raising digital periscopes from the depths.

Of course, there are no polls indicating whether the average North Korean would prefer nuclear arms or Internet access (or food, or reliable power), but given Mr. Kim’s interest in weapons, it is a safe bet it would not matter.

“No doubt it’s harder to make nuclear warheads than to set up an Internet network,” Mr. Pain said. “It’s all a question of priority.”

A version of this article appears in print on , on Page C3 of the New York edition with the headline: The Internet Black Hole That Is North Korea.

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