

The Interview (2014 film)

The Interview is a 2014 American political comedy film directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg in their second directorial work, following *This Is the End*. The screenplay by Dan Sterling is from a story by Rogen, Goldberg and Sterling. The film stars Rogen and James Franco as journalists instructed to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (played by Randall Park) after booking an interview with him.

In June 2014, the North Korean government threatened “merciless” action against the United States if the film’s distributor, Columbia Pictures, went ahead with the release. Columbia delayed the release from October 10 to December 25, and reportedly edited the film to make it more acceptable to North Korea. In November, the computer systems of parent company Sony Pictures Entertainment were hacked by the “Guardians of Peace”, a group the FBI believes has ties to North Korea. After leaking several other then-upcoming Sony films and other sensitive internal information, the group demanded that Sony pull *The Interview*, which it referred to as “the movie of terrorism”. On December 16, 2014, the Guardians of Peace threatened terrorist attacks against cinemas that played *The Interview*.

On December 17, after a number of major North American cinema chains canceled screenings in the interest of safety, Sony canceled the theatrical release of *The Interview*, drawing criticism from the media, Hollywood figures and U.S. President Barack Obama. After initially stating that it had no plans to release the film, Sony made *The Interview* available for online rental and purchase on December 24, and via a limited release at selected cinemas on December 25. It received mixed reviews from critics.

1 Plot

Dave Skylark (James Franco), host of the talk show *Skylark Tonight*, interviews celebrities about personal topics. After Dave and his crew celebrate their 1,000th episode, they discover that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (Randall Park) is a fan of *Skylark Tonight*, prompting the show’s producer Aaron Rapoport (Seth Rogen) to arrange an interview. Aaron travels to rural China to receive instructions from Sook (Diana Bang), a North Korean official, and Dave accepts the task of interviewing Kim.

CIA agent Lacey (Lizzy Caplan) proposes that Dave and Aaron assassinate Kim to facilitate a *coup d’état* by use

of a transdermal strip that will expose Kim to ricin via handshake; they reluctantly agree. Upon their arrival in North Korea, one of Kim’s bodyguards discovers the strip in a pack of gum and chews it, believing it to be gum. Lacey airdrops two more strips from a UAV and instructs Aaron to retrieve them and smuggle them into the palace rectally.

Dave spends the day with Kim, who persuades him that he is misunderstood, and they become friends. At dinner, the bodyguard exposed to ricin has a seizure before death, and inadvertently shoots and kills Kim’s other bodyguard. The next morning, Dave feels guilty and discards one strip, then thwarts Aaron’s attempt to poison Kim with the final strip. At another dinner, Dave discovers Kim’s true character and the truth about the country, including a fake grocery store meant to deceive foreigners into believing North Korea’s supposed prosperity.

Aaron and Sook confess their attraction to each other; Sook reveals that she despises Kim and apologizes for defending the regime’s propaganda. Dave, Aaron and Sook form a plan to break Kim’s cult of personality by causing him to cry on air, thus revealing to the North Korean people that Kim is not a god but a man. During the internationally televised interview with Kim, Dave addresses increasingly sensitive topics and challenges Kim’s need for his father’s approval. Dave’s questions cause Kim to weep uncontrollably during the live interview, ruining Kim’s reputation in front of his subjects and the world. Sook and Aaron meanwhile seize control of the broadcasting center, keeping the interview going despite Kim’s reaction. In retaliation for making him cry Kim shoots Dave, who survives via bulletproof vest.

Dave, Aaron and Sook escape the facility in a tank, with Kim pursuing them in a helicopter. Infuriated by the disastrous interview and angry the world saw him cry, Kim orders that North Korea’s nuclear missiles be prepared for launch as revenge on the rest of the world. But before Kim can issue the command Dave destroys the helicopter with the tank, killing Kim and aborting the launch. Sook guides Dave and Aaron to an escape route, and they are rescued by SEAL Team Six members disguised as North Korean troops. Dave writes a book about his experience, and North Korea becomes a democracy with Sook’s help.

2 Cast

3 Production

Rogen and Goldberg developed the idea for *The Interview* in the late 2000s, joking about what would happen if a journalist was required to assassinate a world leader. They picked North Korea leader **Kim Jong-il**, but put the project on hold upon when Jong-il died and his son **Kim Jong-un** assumed power in 2011.^[11] Development resumed when Rogen and Goldberg realized that Jong-un is closer to their own age, which they felt would be funnier. To write the story, co-written with *Daily Show* writer **Dan Sterling**, they researched meticulously. They aimed to make a project more relevant and satirical than their previous films while retaining toilet humor.^[11] Rogen and Goldberg were pleased when former-NBA star **Dennis Rodman** visited North Korea, as it reinforced their belief that the premise of their film was realistic.^[11] **Randall Park** was the first to audition for the role of Jong-un and got the part immediately.^[11] For the role, he gained 15 pounds and shaved his head to resemble Jong-un's crew cut. Rogen and Goldberg wrote the character as "robotic and strict", but Park instead played it "sheepish and shy", which they found more humorous.^[11]

On March 21, 2013, it was announced that Rogen and Goldberg would direct a comedy film for Columbia Pictures in which Rogen would star alongside **James Franco**.^{[6][12]} On October 1, 2013, **Lizzy Caplan** joined the film's cast.^[7] On October 8, 2013, **Randall Park** and **Timothy Simons** joined to co-star in the film.^[8] In November 2014, following a cyber-attack that stole company information, Rogen and Franco were reported to have been paid \$8.4 million and \$6.5 million, respectively. **Kevin Federline** was paid \$5,000 for his cameo appearance in the film.^[13]

Principal photography began on October 10, 2013, in Vancouver,^[14] and concluded on December 20, 2013.^[15] There are hundreds of visual effects in the film; in a crowd scene at the Pyongyang airport, many in the crowd were digitally manipulated from a shot from *22 Jump Street*.^[11]

4 Controversy

4.1 North Korean reaction

On June 20, 2014, **Kim Myong-chol**, an unofficial spokesman for the North Korean government, said *The Interview* "shows the desperation of the US government and American society ... a film about the assassination of a foreign leader mirrors what the US has done in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine."^[16] On June 25, 2014, the **Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)**, the state-run news agency of North Korea, reported that the government promised "stern" and "merciless" retaliation

if the film were released, stating that "making and releasing a film that portrays an attack on our top-level leadership is the most blatant act of terrorism and war and will absolutely not be tolerated."^{[17][18]} *The Guardian* wrote that the film premise "touched a nerve inside the regime, which takes a dim view of satirical treatment of its leaders and is notoriously paranoid about perceived threats to their safety"^[19] and that North Korea had a "long history of sabre-rattling and of issuing harsh threats that it does not act upon."^[20]

On July 11, 2014, North Korea's **United Nations** ambassador **Ja Song-nam** condemned *The Interview*, saying that "the production and distribution of such a film on the assassination of an incumbent head of a sovereign state should be regarded as the most undisguised sponsoring of terrorism as well as an act of war."^[21] *The Guardian* remarked that his comments were "all perfect publicity for the movie."^[21] On July 17, 2014, the KCNA wrote to U.S. president **Barack Obama**, asking to have the film pulled.^[22]

In August 2014, shortly after *The Interview*'s release was delayed to December 25, it was reported that Sony had made post-production alterations to the film to reduce its insensitivity to North Korea. These changes included modifying the designs of buttons worn by characters, originally modelled after real North Korean military buttons praising the country's leaders, and plans to cut a portion of **Kim Jong-un's** death scene.^[23]

Rogen predicted that the film would make its way to North Korea, stating that "we were told one of the reasons they're so against the movie is that they're afraid it'll actually get into North Korea. They do have bootlegs and stuff. Maybe the tapes will make their way to North Korea and cause a revolution."^[11] Business Insider reported via **Free North Korea Radio** that there was high demand for bootleg copies of the film in North Korea.^[24] The human rights organizations **Fighters for a Free North Korea** and **Human Rights Foundation**, which previously air-dropped offline copies of the **Korean Wikipedia** into North Korea on a bootable **USB** memory device,^[25] plan to distribute DVD copies of *The Interview* via balloon drops.^[26]

4.2 Sony Pictures Entertainment hack

Main article: Sony Pictures Entertainment hack

On November 24, 2014, the computer networks of Columbia Pictures' parent company, Sony Pictures Entertainment, were hacked by an anonymous group identifying themselves as the "Guardians of Peace".^[27] The hackers leaked internal emails, employee records and several recent and unreleased Sony Pictures films, including *Annie*, *Mr. Turner*, *Still Alice* and *To Write Love on Her Arms*. The North Korean government denied involvement in the hack.^{[28][29][30]} On December 8, further ma-



A hacker group compromised much of Sony Pictures Entertainment's computer system in late 2014 in retaliation for the film's content.

materials were leaked, including a demand that Sony pull "the movie of terrorism", widely interpreted as referring to *The Interview*.^{[31][32][33]}

The leak revealed June 2014 e-mails between Sony Pictures Entertainment CEO **Michael Lynton** and **RAND Corporation** defense analyst Bruce Bennett. Bennett advised against toning down *The Interview*'s graphic Jong-un death scene, in the hope that it would "start some real thinking in South Korea and, I believe, in the North once the DVD leaks into the North". Bennett expressed his view that "the only resolution I can see to the North Korean nuclear and other threats is for the North Korean government to eventually go away", which he felt would be likeliest to occur following an assassination of Kim. Lynton replied that a senior figure in the **United States Department of State** agreed. Bennett responded that the office of **Robert R. King**, U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, had determined that the North Korean statements had been "typical North Korean bullying, likely without follow-up."^[34]

In an interview with CNN, Bennett said Lynton sits on the board of trustees of the RAND Corporation, which had asked Bennett to talk to Lynton and give his opinion on the film.^[35] Bennett felt *The Interview* was "coarse" and "over the top", but that "the depiction of Kim Jong-un was a picture that needed to get into North Korea. There are a lot of people in prison camps in North Korea who need to take advantage of a change of thinking in the north." Bennett felt that if the DVD were smuggled into the country it might have an effect "over time".^[36] Bennett contacted the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, a personal friend of his, who "took the standard government approach: we don't tell industry what to do".^[35] Jen Psaki, a spokesperson for the United States Department of State, confirmed that **Daniel R. Russel**, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, had spoken to Sony executives; she reiterated that "entertainers are free to make movies of their choosing,

and we are not involved in that."^[37]

4.3 Hackers' threats

On December 16, 2014, the hackers issued a warning to movie-goers, threatening to attack the **New York** premiere of *The Interview* and any other cinema showing it on its theatrical release, stating:^[29]

We will clearly show it to you at the very time and places *The Interview* be shown, including the premiere, how bitter fate those who seek fun in terror should be doomed to. Soon all the world will see what an awful movie Sony Pictures Entertainment has made. The world will be full of fear. Remember the **11th of September 2001**. We recommend you to keep yourself distant from the places at that time. (If your house is nearby, you'd better leave.)

Whatever comes in the coming days is called by the greed of Sony Pictures Entertainment. All the world will denounce the SONY.^[38]

On December 18, two further messages allegedly from the Guardians of Peace were released. One, sent in a private message to Sony executives, stated that the hackers would not release further information if Sony never releases the film and removed its presence from the internet. The other, posted to **Pastebin**, a web application used for text storage which the Guardians of Peace used for previous messages, stated that Sony had "suffered enough" and could release *The Interview*, but only if Kim Jong-un's death scene was not "too happy". The message also threatened that if Sony made another film antagonizing North Korea, the hackers "will be here ready to fight".^[39]

4.4 Alleged use of unlicensed music

On December 26, 2014, **K-hiphop** singer **Yoon Mi-rae** announced she would sue Sony Pictures for using her song "Pay Day" in the film without permission.^[40]

5 Release

On August 7, 2014, Sony pushed the release date for the film from October 10 to December 25, 2014.^[41] On December 10, **Sony Pictures Entertainment Japan** announced that the film would not be released in Japan as live-action comedy films do not often perform well in the market; in the Asia-Pacific region, the film would be released only in Australia and New Zealand.^[42] The premiere was held in **Los Angeles** on December 11, 2014.^[43]

5.1 Cancellation of wide theatrical release

Following the hackers' threats on December 16, Rogen and Franco canceled scheduled publicity appearances and Sony pulled all television advertising.^[44] The **National Association of Theater Owners** stated that they would not object to cinema owners delaying the film to ensure the safety of movie-goers. Shortly afterwards, the **ArcLight** and **Carmike** cinema chains announced that they would not screen the film.^[45]

On December 17, Sony canceled the New York City premiere. Later that day, other major theater chains including **AMC**, **Cinemark**, **Cineplex**, **Regal** and **Southern Theatres** either delayed or canceled screenings of the film.^[46] The chains reportedly came under pressure from the malls where many theaters are located, fearing that the terror threat would harm their holiday sales. They also feared expensive lawsuits in the event of an attack; Cinemark, for instance, contended that it could not have foreseen the 2012 Aurora shooting, which took place at one of its multiplexes, a defense that would not hold in the case of an attack at a screening of *The Interview*.^[47]

The same day, Sony stated that “we respect and understand our partners’ decision and, of course, completely share their paramount interest in the safety of employees and theater-goers ... We are deeply saddened at this brazen effort to suppress the distribution of a movie, and in the process do damage to our company, our employees, and the American public. We stand by our filmmakers and their right to free expression and are extremely disappointed by this outcome.”^[48] Sony stated that it had no plans to release the film on any platform, including home video.^[49]

5.1.1 Response

The cancellation affected other films portraying North Korea. An **Alamo Drafthouse Cinema** location in **Dallas** planned to hold a free screening of *Team America: World Police*, which features a plot satirizing Kim Jong-un’s father **Kim Jong-il**, in place of its previously scheduled screening of *The Interview*.^{[50][51]} It was later reported that **Paramount Pictures** refused to permit screening of the film.^[52] **New Regency** also pulled out of a planned film adaptation of the graphic novel *Pyongyang* starring **Steve Carell**; Carell declared it a “sad day for creative expression”.^[53] In light of Sony’s decision, **Hustler Video** announced that it would produce a pornographic parody of *The Interview*, entitled *This Ain’t The Interview XXX*. **Hustler** founder **Larry Flynt** stated that “I’ve spent a lifetime fighting for the **First Amendment**, and no foreign dictator is going to take away my right to free speech.”^[54]

Sony received criticism for canceling the wide release.^{[55][56][57]} *Guardian* film critic **Peter Bradshaw** wrote that it was an “unprecedented defeat on American turf”, but that “North Korea will find that their

bullying edict will haunt them”.^[58] *In the Capital and Gizmodo* suggested the cancellation caused a **Streisand effect**, whereby the attempt to remove or censor a work has the unintended consequence of publicizing it more widely.^{[59][60]}

In a press conference, U.S. President **Barack Obama** stated that though he was sympathetic to Sony’s need to protect employees, he thought Sony had “made a mistake. We cannot have a society in which some dictator in some place can start imposing censorship in the United States. I wish they’d spoken to me first. I would have told them: do not get into the pattern in which you are intimidated.”^[61]

Sony Entertainment CEO **Michael Lynton** stated that cancellation was in response to the refusal of cinema chains to screen the film, not the hackers’ threats, and that Sony would seek other ways to distribute the film. Sony stated that the company “is and always has been strongly committed to the **First Amendment** ... Free expression should never be suppressed by threats and extortion.”^[62]

5.2 Revised release

In the days following the cancellation, it was reported that Sony was considering other ways to release the film, citing pressure from the film industry, theater owners, and the White House.^{[62][63]} In an appearance on **NBC’s Meet the Press** on December 21, Sony’s legal council **David Boies** stated that the company was committed to releasing the movie to the public.^[63]

On December 23 Sony announced a **limited release** of *The Interview* on December 25, 2014, at more than three hundred selected **independent** and **arthouse cinemas**.^{[64][65][66][67]} Lynton stated that Sony was “continuing our efforts to secure more platforms and more theaters so that this movie reaches the largest possible audience.”^{[65][66]} On December 24, Sony released *The Interview* for rental or purchase through the streaming services **Google Play**, **Xbox Video**, **YouTube**, and **SeeTheInterview.com**—a website operated by the **stealth startup** **Kernel.com**, whom Sony had also worked with for a marketing and pre-sale campaign for the upcoming film *The Fifth Wave*.^[68] Within hours of its online release, the movie spread to **file sharing** websites after a security hole allowed people to download rather than stream the movie.^[69] **TorrentFreak** estimated that *The Interview* had been downloaded illegally via **torrents** at least 1.5 million times in 2 days.^[70]

On December 27, the **North Korean National Defence Commission** released a statement accusing Obama of being “the chief culprit who forced the Sony Pictures Entertainment to indiscriminately distribute the movie ... Obama always goes reckless in words and deeds like a monkey in a tropical forest.”^[71] On December 28, the film was released on **iTunes**.^[72]

6 Reception

6.1 Box office and online rentals

The Interview opened to a limited release in the United States on December 25, 2014 across 331 theaters^[73] and earned over \$1 million on its opening day. *Variety* called the opening gross “an impressive launch for a title playing in only about 300 independent theaters in the U.S.”^[74] It went on to earn over \$1.8 million in its opening weekend making its total box office gross \$2.9 million.^[75]

In four days, *The Interview* earned \$15 million online to become Sony Pictures’ highest-grossing online release, outselling *Arbitrage* (\$14 million), *Bachelorette* (\$8.2 million), and *Snowpiercer* (\$7 million).^[76]

6.2 Critical reception

The Interview received mixed reviews from critics. On review aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes*, the film holds a 52% approval rating, based on 64 reviews, with an average rating of 5.9/10. The site’s consensus reads: “Unfortunately overshadowed by controversy (and under-screened as a result), *The Interview*’s screenplay offers middling laughs bolstered by its two likable leads.”^[77] On *Metacritic*, the film has a score of 52 out of 100 based on 31 critics, indicating “mixed or average reviews”.^[78]

IGN’s Roth Cornet wrote that “though it’s unlikely to stand out as one of the shrewdest political satires of its time, [it] is a clever, unrestrained and — most importantly — sidesplitting parody that pokes fun at both a vapid media and one of the world’s most dangerous dictators.”^[79] Edward Douglas of *ComingSoon.net* said the film was “hilarious, but it will probably get us nuked.”^[80] Jordan Hoffman of *The Guardian* gave the film three out of five stars and wrote that “if this unessential but agreeable movie really triggered an international response, this is life reflecting art in a major way.”^[81]

Scott Foundas of *Variety* panned the film as “cinematic waterboarding” and “about as funny as a communist food shortage, and just as protracted”, but praised the performances of Randall Park and Diana Bang.^[82] Mike Hale of *The New York Times* also praised Park and Bang, but wrote that “after seeing *The Interview* and the ruckus its mere existence has caused, the only sensible reaction is amazement at the huge disconnect between the innocuousness of the film and the viciousness of the response.”^[83]

7 See also

- Assassinations in fiction

Material which also raises free speech and censorship issues:

- Streisand effect
- *Innocence of Muslims*
- *Death of a Princess*
- *Death of a President*
- *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy

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9 External links

- Official website
- The Interview* at the Internet Movie Database

- *The Interview* at Box Office Mojo
- *The Interview* at Rotten Tomatoes
- *The Interview* at Metacritic

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10.1 Text

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