On May 2, 2020, North Korea’s leader appeared in public, putting an end to rumors about his death or complete incapacity. The frenzy around this subject demonstrated nicely the value of a few “informed sources,” which in the West are accepted as trustworthy and, while Kim Jong-un wasn’t in sight, were busy distributing blatant disinformation. In this context we shall present to our audience a “black list of sources about North Korea,” whose information was not confirmed by other sources, and are 99% “fables” for sure.

**First place** in our list goes to so-called “career defectors” from North Korea, who profit off their status by peddling horror stories about their former homeland. In their midst, assorted versions were advanced to explain Kim’s absence, including “hiding from the epidemic that was devastating the country,” but the one who “outshone” all others is the “storyteller cripple,” and now lawmaker, Ji Seong-ho, who laid Kim to rest back on April 23, stating that he was seriously ill, and could not return to power. At the same time, the power struggle was in full swing between the leader’s wife, sister, and mistress.

Yet, even other defectors, treated this talk with skepticism, in particular Thae Yong-ho. Thae himself, however, soon announced publicly that, although Kim was alive, “one thing can be said for sure - Kim cannot stand up by himself or walk properly”. After Kim’s return, Thae admitted that his statement was untrue, but continued to suggest that Kim
may have health problems.

In the newspaper Dong-A Ilbo, yet another defector, Lee Jong Ho, who had fled to the USA, advanced his version that Kim could have been killed or seriously injured during missile tests that were conducted on April 14.

As a result he was, in fact, reprimanded in the country As Won Gon Park, Professor of International Politics at Handong Global University stated, "Ji, Thae, and others have sources inside the North, but it’s doubtful that they have access to such important information as Kim’s whereabouts and his health problems."

**Second place** goes to the well known “fable” producer, Daily NK, which, while relying typically on anonymous sources, from the start simply reported that on April 12 Kim underwent heart surgery due to “excessive smoking, obesity, and exhaustion.” Then, Daily NK in particular continued to rock the boat, reporting on April 28 that a video in North Korea of Kim Jong-un’s passing began spreading around. It simulated a broadcast of North Korean TV (naturally, Daily NK wanted to be taken at their word, yet they didn’t get their hands on the video itself). It is worth noting that a similar video had already appeared on the Internet under the guise of news by the Associated Press. The funeral of his father was passed off as Kim Jong-un’s. Of course, according to Daily NK, the video already had widespread exposure. Discussion of it was risky, and State Security was “going berserk in search of the author.”

In addition, Daily NK actively spread the news that texts written by Kim during his illness were composed in a style that differed so greatly from his typical style, that everyone understood the texts to have been written for him, and so they did not really dampen the rumors about the leader’s death, which were spreading around the country. That means we await the obituary.

**Third place** goes to Japanese and foreign news media. Regardless of their level of respectability, their faces turn an unhealthy yellow when speaking about North Korea. This time, the weekly Shūkan Gendai especially distinguished itself with the news that, “during his trip around the country, Kim suddenly grabbed his chest and fell. They drove him to a local surgeon for an urgent stent insertion in his cardiac vessels, but the doctor’s hands shook, and Kim was too fat. As a result, the operation lasted, not 1 minute, but 8, and Kim fell into a vegetative state.” In reality, the average time for such an operation, if medical sites are to be trusted, takes approximately 2 hours.

Citing an anonymous intelligence operative, CNN reported on April 20 that Kim was in critical condition after his heart operation. But at the same time, another anonymous source and two named experts held a different opinion. Journalistic standards were formally maintained.

Attention now turns to those who more likely deceived themselves, or were deceived. For example, Anna Fifield of the Washington Post cited trusted sources, who informed her of panic in Pyongyang’s stores, and that helicopters were flying low over the city. This information reinforced quite strongly public opinion that Kim was dead. But there was a problem. Yevgeny Agoshkov, a correspondent for TASS, was in Pyongyang that same day. While walking around the city, he did not notice any helicopters or panic.

On April 25, Qing Feng, Vice Director of HKSTV, Hong Kong’s satellite television network, reported Kim Jong-un’s death According to information from the publication International Business Times, a “very solid source” confirmed this information to her. However, on Qing Feng’s page in China’s social media site, Weibo, that post is no longer there. In her most recent note on April 24, she stated that she herself did not delete her posts, but that may have occurred either from pressure or comments from above, or because her source may have lied.

At least the rest of the news media observed strict standards. CNN’s report that Kim was in critical condition after his heart surgery appeared on April 20, citing an anonymous intelligence operative and material from Daily NY. At the same time, another anonymous source and two named experts held a different opinion.

The Reuters article that described China’s dispatch of a group of doctors and officials to North Korea to advise on Kim, cited three unnamed persons, who were familiar with the situation. The news agency, however, had difficulty determining precisely the trip’s objective, although the departure of both the aircraft and delegation were confirmed. The agency drew its conclusion about the objective of the visit, due to its lack of publicity, and that Chinese physicians had also treated Kim Jong-il, yet the visit might also have been intended to coordinate activities to fight the coronavirus epidemic.

Finally, it’s the turn of those who were not lazy about digging into details, and didn’t chase after a hot story. Multiple informed sources of NK News reported on the frenzy in stores, but they did not tie this together with rumors of Kim’s death. Nor did they conclude that reports from State news media about “more severe emergency, anti-epidemic measures,” taken within the country meant that people should expect disruptions in food shipments from
abroad.

In general, followers of news should keep in mind several rules. Analysis of any sensational news should begin with its source. And the absence of other facts or statements that confirm the version of this “well-informed, anonymous source,” points toward a “fable” with a high degree of probability.

A reference to a “source, wishing to remain anonymous” is used typically in three cases. The first case likely concerns a civil servant or expert, who does not want to make his name public. And, typically, expert observers are well aware of who is being quoted.

In the second case, a directive comes from above regarding news about a specific topic, but since the item cannot just appear out of nowhere, an anonymous source reveals it.

Finally, it also occurs that a journalist invents a certain theory, but to give it weight, he cannot write simply, “many believe,” but instead will write, “a number of experts consider that...” That sounds more authoritative, although current journalistic standards expect the disclosure of experts by name, and a news item should not rely only on an anonymous source or “rumors going around.”

There is one other possibility to expose a “fable” - when dramatic details from a “first-hand source” coincide with disbelief that the news item’s author could have had access to such information. For example, Shūkan Gendai’s news about Kim’s operation came from a certain source in China’s medical circles. But even if one imagined that this hypothetical doctor was a member of a group of physicians, who allegedly departed from China in a rush, who would have entrusted him with such details? It is far easier to imagine that, having received news, even if it was from China, that Kim underwent a stent insertion (theoretically, a mark left on his arm could indicate that), the Japanese journalists embellished the story with contrived details.

Finally, consideration must be given to a source’s political bias, which is a major problem with regard to North Korea. No one trusts North Korea’s official propaganda. There is widespread belief that it exists to put polish on reality. But besides Pyongyang’s propaganda, there is anti-Pyongyang propaganda, and organizations such as Daily NK, or career defectors from the North, who provide the “horrible truth” from the opposite side of the coin. It must be noted that news of this type is also supplied with references to a hidden network of informers, whose exposure risks their lives. Together with the country’s secretiveness this, to put it mildly, creates the temptation to invent further “horrors up North,” because there is almost no practical way to verify, what exactly is happening deep inside North Korea. As a result, with respect to the operations of Daily NK’s office, it is still possible to read evaluations such as: “The organization’s reporting over the years has often proved highly accurate and it has an excellent reputation among professional North Korea watchers”.

And the author would like to conclude with a quote from an editorial from Korea Times: “The media are required to go back to the principles of journalism. They should strengthen their fact-checking functions. They must not provide incorrect and unconfirmed information, especially about Kim’s health which is sensitive to national security. Do not forget that fake news is the enemy of democracy”.

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