"Pyongyang Today, Panem Tomorrow":
A Comparative Study of Authoritarian Control in Fiction and North Korea
by Kathryn Gilliland

In the heart of North Korea, Pyongyang, the elite live in luxury. Many that live there have never known the struggle for basic necessities, while the general population cannot say the same. The elites of the regime are only able to stay in their positions through the control of the general populace and media manipulation. To the government of North Korea, fear is their strongest weapon of oppression, especially when it comes to the younger generations.

Thousands of individuals have suffered at the hands of the North Korean regime, and very few have lived to tell their tale. As a result of this, it is incredibly difficult to truly understand how people suffer at the hands of authoritarian regimes. That is where novels come into play, specifically *The Hunger Games* series. While these novels of suffering did not actually occur within our world, they mirror the authoritarian government of North Korea in striking ways. In the fictional world of Panem, the Capitol represents Pyongyang. Panem is a bubble of society shielded from the knowledge of suffering, where its citizens engage in excess consumption and indulgence. In contrast, the districts go to bed starved and labored by the chokehold of fear.[1] The Capitol thrives on the fear from the districts, even going as far as using it as entertainment propaganda every year during the annual Hunger Games. Two citizens, "tributes," from each district get reaped from a lottery, forced into an arena with other tributes, to fight each other to the death until one winner remains.[2] The winners are then forced to serve as eternal reminders that the Capitol has complete dominance over the districts.[3]

Similarly in North Korea, individuals are subjected to psychological warfare and indoctrination.[4] In contrast to the fictional world of Panem, however, they do not need an arena to assert their dominance. The country itself plays that role. This stark parallel leads to strong observations: fear is consistently systematic, and survival depends on one's ability to navigate generations of lies that have been spun into a nation's identity. Documented accounts from

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[1] Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (London: Scholastic, 2010), 18.
[2] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 18.
[3] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 18–19.
[4] Kang Chol-Hwan and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (London: Atlantic Books Ltd, 2012), 83–90.

defectors prove the link between the usage of propaganda and media manipulation by the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* and its real-world counterpart, the North Korean regime. *The Hunger Games* represents how literature can serve as a powerful lens for visualization of authoritarian regimes maintaining control of their populations through restricting information, instilling fear, and shaping perceptions.

MEDIA MANIPULATION AND PROPAGANDA IN NORTH KOREA

To fully understand the depth of manipulation by the North Korean regime, it is first crucial to understand exactly how the regime controls and manipulates what society sees in the media. In North Korea, state-run television and radio shows are the sole sources of information that people are legally allowed to receive.[5] Each household is given a government-issued in-home radio system that must stay on at all times. They are pre-tuned to government-run stations only, and families are unable to change the station.[6] Outsourced media is highly illegal, to the extent that government officials conduct unnotified raids if a family is suspected of hiding any in their household.[7] This system was put in place following the Korean War under Kim Il Sung's leadership, exemplifying the regime's focus on enacting strict information controls in an effort to maintain ideological unity and prevent any foreign influence.[8] Televisions are controlled in a similar manner. All content seen or heard is carefully curated by the regime's propaganda department to glorify the Kim family, promote the country's Juche ideology, spread false information on other countries, or portray North Korea itself as thriving.[9] Harsh punishments are doled out upon anyone who displays negative emotions while listening to or watching government broadcasts. Defector testimonies and various organization reports place an emphasis on these punishments—stating that they range from basic imprisonment to incredibly strenuous forced labor. While these punishments are certainly physical, their true goal is to reinforce the ideal that the regime holds control over all available information.[10]

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[5] Tara John, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Appoints Sister Head of Propaganda," *Time*, July 24, 2015, https://time.com/3970838/kim-jong-un-sister-north-korea/. 1.

[6] Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 113.

[7] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 122.

[8] Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 148–152.

[9] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 113–114.

[10] Barbara Demick, *Nothing To Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), 247.

Television and radio shows are not the only forms of control over the media that the regime enacts.[11] The regime ensures propaganda promoting the Kim family is ever-present in citizens' daily lives. Since the beginning of his reign of terror, Kim Jong Un has been mythologized in North Korea by the regime's propaganda department.[12] Before he was even officially announced by his father as the next successor of the regime, propagandists were working to make it known to the general populace that he was more than worthy of taking on the role.[13] Society began to hear about the "Leader Comrade," while regime officials began publicly discussing entering "a historic time of transition."[14] Booklets titled *The Material in Teaching the Greatness of Respected Comrade General Kim Jong Un* began getting distributed to every unit of the Korean People's Army as well.[15] He became vastly known as the "genius among geniuses."[16] The regime knew that certain claims about him would be hard to swallow, even in the consistently propaganda-fed nation. They began strategically throwing new stories out in the media so the details would blur together, and all anyone would be able to specifically describe about Kim Jong Un was how great and all-dominating he was. The use of exaggerated claims to ensure loyalty through fear was put to the test by the regime, and it was successful.[17] This personality cult development mirrors the "divine figure" campaigns built under Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung that portrayed them as near-gods—further ingraining the ideal of unquestioned loyalty into the minds of North Korean citizens for generations.[18]

Propaganda was not enough to entirely ensure loyalty to the dictator. Propaganda was needed for the country as a whole.[19] The regime needed people to believe that North Korea was a thriving nation in order to prevent an uprising. Many in society do not realize that the elite in Pyongyang live in luxury, while the working class and the poor do not know where their next meal is going to come from and cannot afford education for their children.[20] This is where the

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[11]Emily Bienvenue, "Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media." *International Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March 1, 2020): 525–27.

[12] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 84.

[13] Mason Richey, "Turning It up to Eleven: Belligerent Rhetoric in North Korea's Propaganda," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (December 1, 2016), 97.

[14] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 71.

[15] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 71.

[16] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 71.

[17] Richey, "Turning It up to Eleven," 99.

[18] B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race* (Melville House, 2010), 102–109.

[19] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 68–70.

[20] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 106–107.

propaganda comes into play. The regime is very selective about what they present to society about the country's success. Their first effort to boost morale for the country was to place a strong push on military strength through broadcasts, but they initially just increased fear towards the government, so the regime dropped those broadcasts and switched their narrative.[21] They decided to place an emphasis on in-person visual propaganda: the theater.[22] All performances were meticulously picked apart to spread the exact message of patriotism that the regime wanted society to see. Nothing demonstrated throughout any theater performance was without meaning.[23] Through the various shows, pride was able to be grown as many saw real people, sometimes even people they knew, sharing their faith in the nation. Theater quickly became the regime's propaganda department's top pick for spreading the belief that the nation was prospering.[24] Other mass performances—such as the Arirang Mass Games—serve a similar purpose.[25] Ultimately, even those that were initially suspicious of the messages being spread about Kim Jong Un in the transition of eras began to find themselves thinking about their suspicions less, proving that unfortunately no one is immune to propaganda.[26]

MEDIA MANIPULATION AND PROPAGANDA IN *THE HUNGER GAMES* SERIES

From North Korean broadcasts to the expertly edited spectacles of propaganda in Panem, the narrative remains the same: if the government has control of their stories, they have control of their citizens.[27] This narrative is the bottom line of why fictional works of literature are the most effective at educating the public on how authoritarian regimes operate and maintain their control.[28] When examining this concept, it becomes increasingly evident that *The Hunger Games* novels, written by Suzanne Collins, allow for extremely accurate visualizations of how the North Korean authoritarian regime operates. Perhaps the most strikingly obvious connection here is how the Capitol in the novels maintains an absolute media lockdown throughout the districts.

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[21] Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 47.

[22] Kim, *Illusive Utopia,* 47–49.

[23] Kim, *Illusive Utopia,* 83.

[24] Kim, *Illusive Utopia,* 48.

[25] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 197–203.

[26]Mariana Claudia Mungiu-Pupazan, "Illusion of Excessive Consumption and Its Effects." *Analele Universităţii Constantin Brâncuşi Din Târgu Jiu*: Seria Economie 1, no. 4 (Special Issue ECO-TREND 2015), 234.

[27] Ismail Tahir, "The Concept of Power in Suzane Collins' The Hunger Games." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2017): 166–74.

[28] Tahir, "Concept of Power in Suzane Collins' *The Hunger Games,*" 166–74.

Each district only sees the news that the Capitol wants them to see, to the extent that they are even restricted from seeing news stories about things occurring in other districts.[29] Along with that, individuals have no idea what life is like in other districts, as travel and communication between them is entirely prohibited.[30] The main character, Katniss Everdeen, acknowledges this when she discovers that there had been an uprising in District 8 upon witnessing a private broadcast only meant for the mayor of District 12's eyes.[31] During her victor's tour sometime later, when visiting District 8 she realized that she never would have known if she had not happened to see that broadcast.[32] If thoughts of revolution were to spread, the regime would stand no chance. Authoritarian regimes thrive on complete and utter control. If the population were to rise against them, they would be extremely outnumbered. There are significantly more citizens in the general populace than there are elites in control.

Now while the games themselves do not directly mirror an aspect of life under North Korea's regime, they are important to discuss when it comes to understanding authoritarian governments through literature. The games are framed throughout each novel as a noble tradition. However, they also serve as a punishment to the districts for their actions during the Capitol's rise to power. As a result of this, the Capitol forces each district to provide one male and one female tribute between the age of twelve and eighteen to the games each year, where they will fight to the death.[33] The last tribute standing is crowned the winner. This role of forced participation reinforces fear and submission to the government on a grand scale, leading to an easily interpretable message. It is here that individuals can truly view what an authoritarian regime does, and what harm they cause to their citizens. The use of entertainment to maintain control at its core demonstrates why authoritarian regimes like North Korea favor media manipulation and propaganda. It acts as a distraction and allows citizens to become pacified. Due to this, most of the general populace in *The Hunger Games* do not even realize how drastically different their lives are from those in the Capitol.

[29] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 80.
[30] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 80.
[31] Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (London: Scholastic, 2021), 78–79.
[32] Collins, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire,* 204–205.
[33] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 18.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF PROPAGANDA

In both North Korea and Panem, propaganda has its most powerful grip in its capacity to shape behaviors and the minds of citizens. This stems from the systematic instillation of fear as well as the normalization of poverty.[34] In Panem, the Capitol focuses a lot of their monopoly of power on the youth populations in the districts — specifically in career districts.[35] Academies teach the children pro-Capitol propaganda, and many even grow to view participating in the games as an honor.[36] North Korea uses similar education programs to indoctrinate their youth with propaganda as well. There are two organizations that stand out in this regard: the Korean Children's Union and the Socialist Patriotic Youth League.[37] Both programs put an emphasis on teaching children the wonderous acts of Kim Jong Un, as well as teaching them the nature of the "collective and organized life" in the country.[38]

Children are not the only ones affected by this, but when it comes to adults, the effects are more physical and emotional. This is mirrored in both North Korea and Panem. In the districts of Panem, the main reason propaganda is so effective stems from individuals' fears of what would occur to their families if there was ever a lack of compliance.[39] The Capitol ensures the people stay consistently afraid, as public executions and punishments occur frequently. No one wants to make a decision that could subject their family to torture, especially publicly, even if that means staying compliant with an abusive government. Situations like these can be seen in North Korea as well. The regime uses consistent surveillance of their citizens, even to the point of employing informants.[40] Using their citizens' fears as their own personal propaganda in turn causes generations of submission.[41]

CONCLUSION

The manipulation of the Capitol mirrors the way authoritarian regimes, specifically North Korea, use the media to suppress the true narratives to keep their populations submissive. This is why understanding the mechanisms of propaganda is essential when it comes to resisting the

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[34] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 112.
[35] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 94.
[36] Collins, *Hunger Games*, 95.
[37] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 114–115.
[38] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 114–115.
[39] Collins, *Hunger Games: Catching Fire,* 18–19.
[40] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 121–122.
[41] Fifield, *Great Successor*, 127–128.

control of authoritarian regimes. Having strong media literacy, the ability to seek the truth instead of just accepting curated headlines and other sources of information, is an extremely powerful defense that must not be taken for granted. As reality and fiction intertwine, citizens and readers alike need to acknowledge the danger that unchecked media control can cause and the value of reliable open information sources. In an era where misinformation spreads like wildfire, ensuring access to diverse news and media sources is the strongest tool society can use. Whether the information about authoritarian regimes comes from fictional characters like Katniss Everdeen or from North Korean defectors, these stories can be remindful of the fact that resistance must always begin with knowledge of the truth. While authoritarian regimes are daunting, they are not as all-powerful as they seem. Understanding their mechanisms of control can lead to a path of successful resistance. "So don't feed the nightmares. Don't let yourself panic…They've taken enough already."[42]

[42] Suzanne Collins, *Sunrise on the Reaping* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2025), 4.

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