Imagining the Audience across the Uncrossable Border: South Korean Radio Broadcasting to North Korea and the Rise of Creativity in Inter-Korean Relations

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Using ethnographic fieldwork data gathered at a South Korean NGO that produces radio broadcasts to North Koreans as part of "unification preparation" (*t'ongil chunbi*), I argue that radio broadcasting to North Korea and preparing for a Unified Korea both involve the professional labor of imagination and creativity that have become critical in navigating the challenges and uncertainties of inter-Korean relations. On the one hand, radio broadcasting to North Korea involves creatively imagining "the North Korean listener," a challenging process of imagining those who reside across a border that radio producers cannot physically cross. On the other hand, preparing for unification is also an imaginative project of anticipating a new Korean nation that can merge two peoples, infrastructures, and cultures, one day in the uncertain future. More than seven decades since national division on the Korean peninsula, imagination has risen to become one of the most critical capacities in managing (present and future) political and social relations between two nations and peoples that are divided across an uncrossable border.

Keywords: creativity, radio, inter-Korean relations, Korean unification, unification preparation

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Ⅰ. Introduction:
The Work of Invisible Radio Waves in Inter—Korean Relations

Using ethnographic fieldwork data gathered at a South Korean NGO that produces radio broadcasts to North Koreans as part of "unification preparation" (*t'ongil chunbi*), this article argues that radio broadcasting to North Korea and preparing for a Unified Korea both involve the professional labor of imagination and creativity that have become critical in navigating the challenges and uncertainties of inter-Korean relations.[1] On the one hand, radio broadcasting to North Korea involves creatively imagining "the North Korean listener," a challenging process of imagining those who reside across a border that radio producers cannot physically cross. On the other hand, preparing for unification is also an imaginative project of anticipating a new Korean nation that can merge two peoples, infrastructures, and cultures. More than seven decades since national division on the Korean peninsula, imagination has risen to become one of the most critical capacities in managing (present and future) political and social relations between two nations and peoples that are divided across an uncrossable border.

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Unbeknownst to many foreigners and even some South Koreans, radio content produced in office spaces in Seoul is crossing the heavily fortified borders between the two Koreas every day to reach the ears of North Koreans. Since the early 2000s, several non-state South Korean groups have formed to engage in the professional labor of producing radio broadcasts intended for North Korean listeners.[2] Founded in 2005 by a small group

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1 In this article, Romanization of Korean words and names follow the McCune-Reischauer system. Also note that page numbers may not be specified for information or quotation taken from web-based sources.

2 This includes groups such as Free North Korea Radio (2004—), Unification Media Group (which brings together Open Radio for North Korea and Radio Free Chosun) (2005—), and North Korea Reform Radio (2007—). Note that the article is limited to the author's ethnographic experience in UPI and

of South Korean activists passionate about democracy, unification, and change on the Korean peninsula, UPI[3] is one such media group, housed in an unassuming office building in a residential neighborhood of Seoul populated by apartments, restaurants, and schools.

At UPI, although most of the work week is spent by radio producers on their individual radio shows — such as brainstorming the week's theme, recruiting available guests, writing up the show's script, and recording and editing the segments — the weekly meeting is a chance for all the radio PDs (short for "producers") to get together and check in with each other. Since their radio broadcasts are directed to North Koreans across the border, radio PDs often have no idea how their "audience" is reacting to their shows. Unlike typical radio shows that can track daily listenership ratings or receive live feedback from listeners, UPI radio PDs work with uncertainty: Who is listening? What do they approve or disapprove of about the content that they are producing? Without direct access to their audience, it is thus up to the Radio Team to monitor each other's shows and offer constructive feedback, as they imagine what a North Korean might want or need.

In one weekly meeting in the spring of 2018, a new radio show that teaches basic Chinese was receiving positive feedback from the staff. Since North Koreans who are pondering defection will most likely have to go through China, the Radio Team thought this is a show that will likely be attractive to many North Korean listeners. Instead of ideological indoctrination about the benefits of democracy and capitalism, this new program provides practical life skills that their North Korean listeners would want to tune in for. On the other hand, there was some internal criticism over the frequent use of loan words and neologisms that their North Korean listeners would not follow. "I noted that we are using words like 'well-being' or 'bucket list' without explaining what they mean," one senior radio PD pointed out to the rest of the group. "It's fine to use them,

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does not reflect the entirety of the South Korean broadcasting to the North Korea sector.

3   UPI is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of my interlocutors.

but we need to explain what they mean."

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This article is based on twelve months of immersive, long-term ethnographic fieldwork research at UPI between 2017 and 2018.[4] As an intern at UPI, I conducted participant-observations of UPI as a place of work and carried out unstructured interviews with approximately thirty employees during my time there. This was complemented by observations of many public events involving the topic of Korean unification and conversations with a number of leading experts in the field of Korean unification, such as the former Minister of Unification and Minister of Foreign Affairs and researchers at Korea Institute for National Unification and University of North Korean Studies.

On one hand, scholarship on inter-Korean relations has largely been state-centric, either through the disciplinary lens of history or political science.[5]Over the years, several prominent issues within the domain of inter-Korean relations have attracted the bulk of scholarly interest from anthropologists, from the DMZ[6], family reunions[7], to defector resettlements.[8]

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4   Four months of preliminary fieldwork were conducted during the summers of 2015 and 2016. This ethnographic fieldwork research has been funded by the Social Science Research Council, Harvard University's Korea Institute, Fulbright Korea, and Harvard University's Committee on General Scholarships.

5   Hak-chun Kim, *The Domestic Politics of Korean Unification: Debates on the North in the South, 1948-2008* (Seoul; Edison, NJ: Jimoondang, 2010).

6   Eleana Jean Kim, "Toward an Anthropology of Landmines: Rogue Infrastructure and Military Waste in the Korean DMZ," *Cultural Anthropology* 31 no. 2 (2016): 162-187.

7   Nan Kim-Paik, *Liminal Subjects, Liminal Nation: Reuniting Families and Mediating Reconciliation in Divided Korea* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007); Joowon Park, "Voices from War's Legacies: Reconciliation and Violence in Inter-Korean Family Reunions," *Anthropology and Humanism* 45 no. 1 (2020): 25-42.

8   Byung-Ho Chung, "Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 32 no. 1 (2008): 1-27; Jin-Heon Jung, "The Religious-Political Aspirations of North Korean Migrants and Protestant Churches in Seoul," *Journal of Korean Religions* 7 no. 2 (2016): 123-48.

Scholars such as Kim, Cho, and Jeong[9] and Koo[10] have started to attend to South Korean civil society's important involvement in Korean unification (see also Hwang[11] who advocates for a non-state approach to inter-Korean relations). In particular, ethnographic approaches to inter-Korean relations hold the potential to shed new insights about how relations between the two Koreas can also occur beyond the foreign policies between neighboring nation states or the affective relations between separated family members.[12] By taking a look at how inter-Korean relations are professionally managed by institutional actors situated in particular bureaucratic roles (e.g. producing radio broadcasts, preparing for future unification), this article pushes us to take seriously the agency of South Korean social actors who are engaging those across the uncrossable border in surprisingly creative ways by harnessing the power of invisible radio waves.

On the other hand, an ethnographic approach to "radio fields"[13] has been gaining ground in the field of anthropology of media.[14] Paying critical attention to how radio continues to be produced, distributed, and consumed in different ways around the contemporary world is the

9   Hanna Kim, Heejung Cho and Bokgyo Jeong, "Social Networks and Ideological Orientation of South Korean NGOs Involved in the Unification Issues of the Korean Peninsula,"*Asian Survey* 51 no. 5 (2011): 844-875.

10 Kab-Woo Koo, "Civil Society and the Unification Movement in South Korea: Issues and Challenges," *Journal of Peace and Unification* 1 no. 1 (2011): 91-126.

11 Jihwan Hwang, "The Paradox of South Korea's Unification Diplomacy: Moving Beyond a State-Centric Approach," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 23 no. 1 (2014): 49–72.

12 Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Hyun Ok Park, *The Capitalist Unconscious from Korean Unification to Transnational Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

13 Lucas Bessire, Daniel Fisher, and Faye Ginsburg, *Radio Fields: Anthropology and Wireless Sounds in the 21st Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Lucas Bessire and Daniel Fisher, "The Anthropology of Radio Fields," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 363-78.

14 Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

driving agenda of this emerging body of work. While radio has largely been interpreted within a dichotomy of either imposing globalizing, homogenizing ideologies from above that abet national or commercial interests (e.g. corporate radio) or empowering local people to have their own voices (e.g. community radio), the case of South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea is an ethnographic case that can confound such binary-thinking. UPI is at once "community radio" in its small scale and budget and its ambition to empower North Koreans who lack freedom of information; but at the same time, it is also part of the globalizing, homogenizing project to make every corner of Earth open to democracy and capitalism. Ethnographically studying South Korean radio broadcasts to North Korea is thus a timely contribution to both inter-Korean relations studies and radio scholarship.

II. Radio Broadcasting to North Korea: A Brief History

In 2017, the United Kingdom joined the ranks of South Korea, the U.S., and Japan in sending radio broadcasts to North Korea via short- and medium-wave radio frequencies. In its first broadcast in the September of 2017, the BBC shared with North Korean listeners the latest global news about the U.S. military and German politics, and an interview with Ban Ki-moon, former Secretary General of the United Nations.[15] The broadcast also included local weather news of major North Korean cities from Pyongyang to Chongjin.[16] As the North Korean state ramped up its nuclear and missile testing that year, the BBC took this step as part of the international community's strategy to apply more pressure to North Korea to deter its military ambitions, similar in logic to increasing economic sanctions in response to aggressive behaviors taken by North Korea. The

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15 BBC, "BBC Launches Services for Ethiopia and Eritrea," September 18, 2017.

16 Yoon-young Cho, "Hwaksandoenŭn Haeoe Taebukpangsong, Yŏng BBC Hamnyut't⋯ "Tepuk Chumin 30% Ch'ŏngch'wit'e"" (Expansion of foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea, U.K.'s BBC joins⋯ "30% of North Korean residents listen in"), *Newsis*, October 9, 2017.

BBC had become the latest member of a growing number of foreign broadcasting stations that produce Korean-language radio broadcasts aimed at North Korean listeners: the U.S.'s Voice of America and Radio Free Asia[17]; Japan's Wind from the Homeland and Sea Breeze[18]; and South Korea's KBS Hanminjok ["Korean People"] Radio, Free North Korea Radio, Unification Media Group, North Korea Reform Radio, National Intelligence Service's Voice of the People and Echo of Hope.

In a country such as North Korea where there are severe limitations to freedom of information and media, radio is an important medium to distribute timely external information across national borders.[19] Although the contemporary world is increasingly moving toward video or the Internet, radio remains an essential tool for the global political campaign to send media and information to isolated parts of the world that are disconnected from the rest of the world for political, economic, and technological reasons. The same year, the BBC expanded its radio service to not only North Korea but also Ethiopia and Eritrea.[20]

Radio is also only one option among many other creative attempts to send information and media into North Korea, such as delivering propaganda leaflets in balloons or smuggling in USBs containing South Korean film and television.[21] Although North Koreans are only permitted

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17 In 1994, Voice of America started radio broadcasting to North Korea after the death of Kim Il-sung, and a large number of defections resulting from the famine alerted the international community about the country's poor human rights conditions; Radio Free Asia joined soon after in 1997.

18 Much of Japan's radio broadcasts are concerned with the particular issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens, according to Yoon-young Cho, "Han'guk Taebukpangsong Haetpyŏtchŏngch'aek Ihu Yumyŏngmushirhwa" (South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea loses force after the Sunshine Policy), *Newsis*, October 10, 2017.

19 For a comprehensive overview of the changing media environment in North Korea, see Intermedia, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment," 2012, 5-23; and Intermedia, "'Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 2018, 4-23.

20 BBC, "BBC Launches Services for Ethiopia and Eritrea," September 18, 2017.

21 Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets,*

to consume state-sponsored media, an increasing number of them are therefore gaining access to foreign media. Different estimates (usually based on survey research of North Korean defectors) put foreign radio listenership rates at about 10-30% of North Koreans.[22]

The North Korean state is known to have protested against the BBC's broadcasting through the North Korean Embassy in London, asserting that the BBC's move is part of the imperialists' nefarious plot to infiltrate and destroy North Korean society; experts, however, believe the real reason for the North Korean state's objection is that accessing foreign media may result in undesirable "consciousness change" among its people that may lead to resistance or defection.[23] Since the mid-2000s, the North Korean state has created the "109 Group" to find and punish North Koreans who dare to consume foreign media, including not only foreign radio broadcasts but also South Korean film and television.[24] Punishments for accessing foreign media are known to be harsh, such as political prison camp sentences and even death.[25] However, the increasing willingness of authority figures to take bribes to overlook these offenses and the increasing unwillingness of North Koreans to report on each other for such behavior have created an environment in which the illicit consumption of

Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors (Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2015); Choe Sang-Hun, "As Floating Propaganda Irks North Korea, the South Isn't Happy Either," *New York Times*, June 11, 2020.

22 Intermedia, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment," 2012, 20; Intermedia, "'Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 2018, 10.

23 Yoon-young Cho, "Hwaksandoenŭn Haeoe Taebukpangsong, Yŏng BBC Hamnyut't… "Tepuk Chumin 30% Ch'ŏngch'wit'e"" (Expansion of foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea, U.K.'s BBC joins… "30% of North Korean residents listen in"), *Newsis*, October 9, 2017.

24 Robert King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," *Beyond Parallel*, May 15, 2019.

25 Nat Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls," *38 North*, June 9, 2017; Yoon-young Cho, "Puk Chumin, Han'guk Noraebut'ŏ Tŭtta Chŏmch'a Nyusŭ Tchokŭ-ro" (North Korean residents first start listening to Korean songs, then move on to the news), *Newsis*, October 11, 2017.

foreign media endures and expands.[26]

The North Korean state is also known to engage in radio jamming (such as strategically broadcasting heavy noise on the same frequency as the South Korean stations to make them unlistenable), which in turn forces foreign radio stations to change frequencies often in response.[27] For instance, Williams notes that South Korean radio stations operated by the National Intelligence Service shifted their frequencies downwards by five kHz so that their broadcasts can be heard more intelligibly without the jamming by North Korean authorities. Figure 1 shows the South Korean radio station signal on the left (in a stronger, red line) and the North Korean jamming in the right (in the weaker, yellow line); Williams notes that until the frequency was changed, these two were on top of one other.

<Figure 1> Responding to radio jamming by changing frequencies
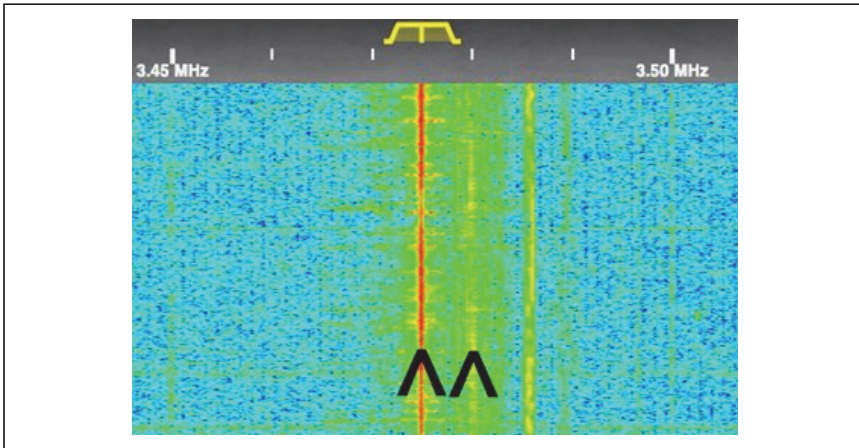
Source: Martyn Williams, "South Korea Adjusts Some Radio Frequencies to Escape Jamming," *North Korea Tech*, October 2, 2019.

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26 Nat Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls," *38 North*, June 9, 2017.

27 Martyn Williams, "South Korea Adjusts Some Radio Frequencies to Escape Jamming," *North Korea Tech*, October 2, 2019.

Outside North Korea, there are both ideological support and financial backing for radio broadcasting to North Korea for its potential in improving human rights there — namely, the right to free information[28] — in a country infamously ranked last in the World Press Freedom Index[29], an annual ranking conducted by Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters Sans Frontières*). However, there are also critical voices — such as South Korean leftists who seek friendly relations with North Korea — that see radio broadcasting to North Korea as "interfering in the internal affairs" of another sovereign nation and which should be avoided.[30]

South Korea started its radio broadcasting to North Korea since the 1970s when the publicly funded Korean Broadcasting System (KBS)'s Social Education Radio started producing anti-communist radio broadcasts targeting North Koreans.[31] However, South Korean state-sponsored radio broadcasting started to languish in 2000 when the first Inter-Korean Summit between the two leaders resulted in promises to avoid criticism of each other's regimes. In 2007, KBS Social Education Radio was eventually re-named KBS Hanminjok Radio and re-branded as a radio station that targets Koreans not only in North Korea, but also in Japan, China, and Russia. As KBS's role dwindled in the 2000s, several groups mostly made up of North Korean defectors and South Korean activists started their own radio stations. Many of these non-state groups — including UPI, the site of

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28 According to the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

29 See "2020 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, accessed October 9, 2021, https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2020. In 2020, North Korea was ranked last in 180th place, while South Korea was ranked #42.

30 Yoon-young Cho, "Hwaksandoenŭn Haeoe Taebukpangsong, Yŏng BBC Hamnyut't⋯ "Tepuk Chumin 30% Ch'ŏngch'wit'e" " (Expansion of foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea, U.K.'s BBC joins⋯ "30% of North Korean residents listen in"), *Newsis*, October 9, 2017.

31 Yoon-young Cho, "Han'guk Taebukpangsong Haetpyŏtchŏngch'aek Ihu Yumyŏngmushirhwa" (South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea loses force after the Sunshine Policy), *Newsis*, October 10, 2017.

my ethnographic fieldwork research — are funded by the U.S. government through intermediary institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) as part of their global political campaign to spread democracy and improve human rights.[32] This article thus joins the ongoing interest among scholars, journalists, activists, and governments on how foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea can contribute to the on-the-ground changes occurring in North Korea.[33]

III. Crossing Borders to Reach the North Korean Listener

Radio Broadcasting to North Korea as Part of "Unification Media"

Established in the mid-2000s, UPI focuses on *t'ongilmidŏ* ("unification media") as part of the larger national project of "unification preparation" in contemporary South Korea. With a staff of approximately 25 to 30 employees, UPI's work force is divided into four teams: news, radio, video, and operations team. Using text, sound, and video, UPI engages in

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32 A small part of UPI's funding comes from donations made by South Korean donors. However, the fact that most of the private sector funding for South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea comes from the United States means that groups such as UPI are not free from the influence of changing U.S. interests in the Korean peninsula. It is also important to note that because these small non-state groups such as UPI are not under the supervision of South Korean media laws and institutions (e.g. Broadcast Act, Korean Communications Commission), the broadcasts are not subject to strict regulation; for instance, I noted during my time at UPI that music is freely used in the broadcasts with little regard for copyright laws. Finally, such small non-state groups face some criticism for lacking expertise, criticism that my interlocutors at UPI were acutely aware of and did their utmost to combat by striving to improve its "expertise" and "competitiveness" through various training initiatives for its employees.

33 See, for instance, Andrei Lankov, "Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime," *Foreign Affairs* 88 no. 6 (2009): 95–105; and Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2015).

multi-media work that aims to promote change in North Korea and prepare for unification on the Korean peninsula. One of UPI's largest and oldest teams is the Radio Team. The Radio Team uses short-wave radio (radio transmission that uses short wave – as opposed to medium or long wave – frequencies) to send information about the outside world into North Korea. The goal of the Radio Team is to effect "change in the consciousness of North Korean listeners" so that they are more receptive to democratic, capitalistic futures, and prepare for unification by bridging the cultural, informational gap between North and South Koreans. The Radio Team is engaged in producing various radio shows so that UPI can broadcast three hours of radio programming to North Korea everyday: two hours of the day's programming is original content, with one hour of re-runs. On the weekends, all three hours are re-runs of the weekday programming.

So far, the South Korean government has not openly supported or funded groups such as UPI, even though transmitting medium radio waves (e.g. AM) from South Korea would drastically improve the reception quality for North Korean listeners, largely because of the political sensitivity of such content. The North Korean regime does not want outside information coming into their borders, so for the South Korean state to publicly acknowledge and actively encourage groups like UPI can be harmful to friendly inter-Korean relations. Therefore, UPI resorts to creating the radio content in their Seoul office but using foreign transmitting stations in other parts of Asia to send the short-wave radio to North Korea, thereby lowering the quality of reception for their North Korean listeners in this roundabout process.

During my time at UPI from 2017 to 2018, the transmitting station was originally located in Uzbekistan, but was then re-located to Taiwan when UPI signed a contract with another foreign radio transmitting station. "Short-wave radio frequencies, in theory, can reach anywhere on Earth by bouncing off the ionsphere[34] and rebounding back to Earth hundreds and

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34 The ionosphere refers to the layer of the Earth's atmosphere that is capable of reflecting radio waves. Please see "Ionosphere," National Oceanic and

thousands of miles from their point of origin," states UPI in its website. But UPI also openly acknowledges that in reality, "short-wave transmissions are both weak and easily affected by atmospheric conditions, jamming from the North Korean authorities, and other uncontrollable factors," making it a highly uncertain endeavor.

Several of the senior staff at UPI monitor the broadcast every day to ensure that their radio programming is actually reaching North Korean listeners, but the reception quality is often very poor and barely intelligible to the average ears. Since UPI pays the foreign transmitting station to air their radio broadcasts, the senior staff regularly consults with the foreign transmitting station when they detect that the reception quality is lower than usual. If the reason for the poor quality is something that the foreign transmitting station can address, the foreign transmitting station does so (e.g. changing radio frequencies, implementing technical adjustments), but if the foreign transmitting station finds it to be "beyond their control" — such as unexpectedly poor atmospheric conditions or politically motivated jamming by North Korean state authorities — there is often little that can be done in response. In other words, the success of UPI radio producers' labor – i.e. reaching North Korean listeners – is subject to uncertain conditions every day, as a combination of various factors beyond UPI's control determines the daily likelihood of delivering radio waves that are strong and unhindered enough to be intelligible to the ears of North Korean listeners. Many obstacles stand in the way of UPI radio producers: from the South Korean state's hesitancy to support them, the formidably politicized and militarized borders between the two countries that cannot be physically crossed, unfavorable atmospheric conditions, to the North Korean state's jamming. In spite of the many obstacles that stand in their way, UPI radio PDs work in the hopes that these invisible radio waves are reaching the ears of some North Korean listeners. In these challenging political, technological, and atmospheric conditions of the divided Korean peninsula, short-wave radio waves are the only creative way for some South

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Atmospheric Administration, accessed December 20, 2021, https://www.swpc.noaa.gov/phenomena/ionosphere.

Koreans to reach some North Koreans on a regular basis.

On any typical weekday afternoon, radio PDs on the third floor of UPI's offices can be found sitting outside the radio booths, wearing headphones and signaling cues to the radio personalities and guests inside. Most of the radio personalities and guests are regulars — ranging from professors, researchers, activists, students, North Korean defectors, to sometimes even celebrities — who volunteer their time and talent to UPI. The radio booths are booked throughout the day, with PDs trying to record their segments for the day's radio broadcast before the 5 p.m. afternoon deadline. Park PD is in charge of gathering the radio segments from all the PDs before sending it off as a single digital file to the radio transmitting station abroad that is paid by UPI to broadcast their radio shows to North Korea in short-wave frequency.

In the early years of UPI, the radio content was highly critical of the North Korean state. In the words of Choi *t'imjang*, one of the senior staff at UPI and leader of the Operations Team, it was "pro-South propaganda" to counter the North Korean regime's propaganda (which explains why UPI continues to be seen as "conservative" [*bosu*] in the eyes of many field professionals, in spite of its institutional aspiration to be politically neutral). However, UPI has, over time, taken a markedly different approach to change the minds and behaviors of North Koreans after UPI's senior staff reached the conclusion that North Koreans may have more trust of their radio content if it was more "objective."

I discovered that this shift toward objective content was strategically made in the wake of UPI leadership's realization that the institution cannot weather the unpredictable swings in South Korean politics between conservative and progressive administrations without increasing its "objectivity," "expertise," and "competitiveness." During my year at UPI, countless numbers of training initiatives were launched by UPI leaders to transform the new and old employees into expert media professionals who can remain relevant, whether the Blue House was occupied by Lee Myung-bak or Moon Jae-in, two recent Presidents with markedly different

approaches and priorities to inter-Korean relations. By striving to position itself as a professional media group that produces high-quality, objective media content, UPI hoped to survive in a precarious environment where small, non-state groups working on North Korean issues disappeared overnight from being on the wrong side of the conservative-progressive axis.

In lieu of blatant pro-South, anti-North propaganda-like content, UPI's Radio Team now operates under the philosophy that delivering "accurate," "informative," and "entertaining" content is the more effective approach in winning the hearts and minds of North Koreans. UPI's Radio Team has two general categories in its radio content: *Sisa* (news, current affairs) and *Kyoyang* (educational, entertaining programs). Instead of seeing the "North Korean people" as a uniform mass, the Radio Team has also been trying to strategically target different sub-groups of North Korean residents by diversifying its content, such as a radio show introducing 20s/30s life in South Korea that targets similar age groups in North Korea or a radio show teaching basic Chinese that targets those who have plans of defecting to/or have already defected to China.

Creatively Imagining the North Korean Audience

During ethnographic fieldwork at UPI, I have found that content creation for North Korean listeners is a highly creative genre of labor because radio PDs at UPI cannot directly know their North Korean listeners, their "imagined audience." An essential part of their work thus involves *imagining* what their audience will be like and *creatively* coming up with radio content that can satisfy their imagined audience. The creativity and imagination involved in audienceship was made particularly crystal clear to me during a company workshop where radio PDs were asked to create "listener profiles" of UPI's radio content. In groups of four or five, radio PDs began brainstorming who they imagine are regularly tuning into UPI's radio shows:

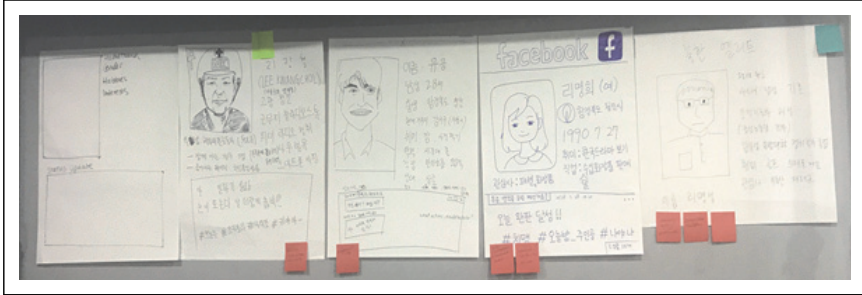<Figure 2> "Listener profiles" created during a company workshop in 2018

Photo taken by Author.

> *Myung-hee is a 27-year-old woman living in Chongjin who sells smuggled*
> *makeup products in the informal market. She enjoys watching South Korean*
> *dramas during her downtime. Radio content on the latest fashion trends could*
> *be something Myung-hee would be interested in···. But Myung-sung, a*
> *45-year-old party official living in Pyongyang, whose interests are golfing*
> *and investing, may want to hear radio shows about very different things. He*
> *might be interested in hearing about economic sanctions news or currency*
> *exchange rates···*

This workshop exercise brings to light how imaginative the radio production process actually is, when their work requires a leap of faith that UPI's radio content is catering to the imagined interests and curiosities of those whom they have never (and may never) meet. On any day, it is unclear *who* will be listening to the fruits of their labor (e.g. a 25 year old single woman working in a factory and interested in South Korean fashion, or a 45 year old businessman looking for information on China?), but radio PDs continue to produce content that they hope is promoting change and preparing for unification, one radio broadcast at a time.

I argue, then, that an integral part of producing radio broadcasts for North Korean listeners has become the creative labor of *imagining the audience.* Who are they? What are their needs and desires? How will hearing

this particular radio content make them think and act differently? Considering that a number of foreign radio stations that target North Korean listeners have an investment in changing North Korea/ns (in the direction of more democracy, more human rights, more capitalism, more openness to the outside world, etc.), there is a strong interest in understanding who they are and creating content that can influence their thoughts and actions in a particular direction.

Ⅳ. Knowledge and Ignorance in Creatively Imagining the North Korean Listener

In both casual conversations with my interlocutors at UPI and industry discussions about North Korean listeners, a recurring image appears of the stereotypical North Korean listener: someone listening alone late at night around 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., "hours which are safer from security personnel visits and curious neighbors."[35] In response to this imagined image of the stereotypical North Korean listener covered under his sheets away from prying eyes at night, many foreign radio broadcasting stations strategically target late hours.[36] The stereotypical listener is also imagined to have at first randomly come across foreign radio stations while changing frequencies. North Korean radio devices must be registered with the state and technical adjustments are made by state authorities to the radio devices so that residents can only listen to state-sponsored channels. However, curious North Koreans can illicitly adjust their radio devices so that they can experiment with different frequencies. Since the 2000s, with more trade with China, there are also more short-wave radio devices entering the country through Korean-Chinese merchants.[37] At first, the

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35 Robert King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," *Beyond Parallel*, May 15, 2019.

36 Yoon-young Cho, "Puk Chumin, Han'guk Noraebut'ŏ Tŭtta Chŏmch'a Nyusŭ Tchokŭ-ro" (North Korean residents first start listening to Korean songs, then move on to the news), *Newsis*, October 11, 2017.

37 *Ibid.*

imagined listener does not know which foreign radio station it is (South Korean? American? British?), but starts tuning in when he hears the familiar sounds of the Korean language. Some of them, then, turn into regular, committed listeners. According to King, "there are few casual listeners to foreign radio. Because of the danger of being caught and punished, individuals who listen to foreign radio are committed listeners who listen regularly."[38] In other words, the random listener is imagined to turn into a regular listener only if the radio content is engaging or useful enough to risk possible punishment.

The stereotypical image of a North Korean listener that I have described so far is vague at best and does not provide the level of specificity or detail that is useful in audienceship research. However, considering that South Korean radio producers cannot cross the political border to North Korea to meet their potential listeners, they must turn to various *indirect* sources of knowledge to improve their understanding of their target audience. In particular, talking to North Korean defectors is one of the most common methods of gaining access to North Korea/ns indirectly. However, obtaining information about North Koreans through defectors is not as simple as it may seem.

Although most (indirect) research on North Korea/ns rests on the interviews, surveys, and testimonies given by North Korean defectors, refugees, and travelers, there were recurring concerns expressed by my interlocutors at UPI that this is not the same as *directly* going into North Korea and talking to North Koreans *currently* living inside the borders of North Korea, which re-affirms the belief (or myth) that there is far superior authenticity to information gained from unmediated access to North Korea; and on the flip side, that there is some questionable quality to knowledge gained indirectly (through North Korean defectors, for instance), even though that is how most research and journalism on North Korea/ns is done.[39]

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38 Robert King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," *Beyond Parallel*, May 15, 2019.

Here, I briefly turn our attention to a 2016 survey, conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a U.S. think tank based in Washington D.C., in which thirty-six North Korean residents were included. The fact that this survey was done among North Koreans currently living in North Korea was argued to be the main merit of this study because "these opinions are *current*" (emphasis added), Myong-Hyun Go notes in a commentary about the survey titled "The Merits of Conducting Surveys Inside North Korea."[40]

Go explains the reason why North Korean residents are so valued:[41]

"··· it is rare for refugees to arrive in South Korea within weeks of escaping from North Korea. Some spend years in China, and while in

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39 Note that several foreign media agencies such as the Associated Press, Kyodo News, and Xinhua News have a Pyongyang office, but it is nearly impossible for these in-country journalists to interact with ordinary North Koreans without a representative of the state present to monitor the meeting. Even though it remains highly doubtful that visiting North Korea to talk to North Koreans currently residing in North Korea necessarily yields more and/or better information, I have observed that there is still widespread anxiety about information gained indirectly through North Korean defectors who no longer live in the country. On a related note, whether or not having been to North Korea (and how many times you have been to North Korea) truly determines the quality or quantity of one's knowledge on North Korea, I would frequently hear South Korean industry professionals introduce themselves as "having been to North Korea, X number of times," or "unfortunately haven't been to North Korea" to either boost their authority (in the former case) or qualify their expert status (in the latter case).

40 Myong-Hyun Go, "The Merits of Conducting Surveys Inside North Korea," Beyond Parallel, November 2, 2016.

41 Go acknowledges that random sampling was not possible in this survey due to the sensitive political context in North Korea; instead, CSIS had to resort to "convenience sampling" because respondents were chosen among those who had a relationship of trust with the survey administrators. Moreover, because of the dangerous nature of conducting such a survey, the sample size had to be extremely small (i.e. 36), making it far from the ideal public opinion survey that can represent North Korea as a whole. In spite of these obvious downsides, the survey — titled "A View from North Korea" — goes to validate North Korean residents as the most valued sources of "current," "direct" information on North Korea (see Figure 3).

transit, they live under constant threats of forced repatriation by the Chinese authorities. Once they arrive in South Korea their recollection of North Korea *may no longer be current and could be biased*" (emphasis added).

Considering that more than 30,000 North Korean defectors are more conveniently available for research in South Korea, the impulse to run such a survey among North Korean residents — a risky, expensive endeavor, according to interlocutors I have talked to who have been closely involved in running this survey — reveals the fetishization of "current," "direct" information from North Korea/ns, which is considered to be more authentic and authoritative.

<Figure 3> Demographic information of North Korean residents surveyed by CSIS
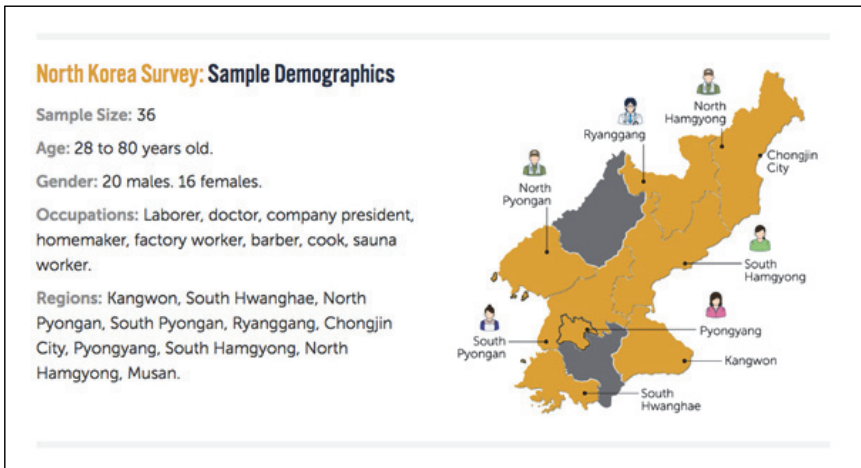
Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies, "A View Inside North Korea." 2016.

Moreover, knowledge gained about North Korea/ns through defectors is doubted not only because of its indirectness and outdatedness, but also because North Korean defectors are not statistically representative of the general North Korean population.[42] In short, because the North Korean

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42 For instance, Go notes that: "According to the latest statistics from South Korean Ministry of Unification, 76% of the refugees in South Korea hailed

defector population is heavily imbalanced in terms of region of origin and gender, knowledge from this statistically unrepresentative sample is therefore considered to be not fully dependable for the task of understanding North Koreans. The President of UPI once noted in a talk that he only takes half of what North Korean defectors say into account because of this very demographic unrepresentativeness. Other South Korean experts have confessed to me that they only take half of what North Korean defectors say seriously because these experts claimed that many North Korean defectors are prone to lies and exaggerations; such statements suggest that discrimination against North Korean defectors remains pervasive even among experts who have more experience interacting with North Korean defectors than the average South Korean. In other words, although North Korean defectors are often the only indirect means of gaining knowledge about North Korea/ns, many do not consider them to be a source of authoritative, definitive knowledge on North Korean listeners.

Under such challenging conditions of information gathering, the resulting audienceship research on North Korean listeners continues to be subject to doubt, in spite of the industry-wide agreement on the importance of "knowing your audience." Therefore, the task of imagining the North Korean listener remains a challenging endeavor for the South Korean radio PDs who must navigate not only knowledge but also *ignorance* about the country and people across the uncrossable border. Under such conditions of knowledge *and* ignorance, creativity becomes even more

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from just two provinces in North Korea: North Hamgyong and Ryanggang, both of which border China. According to the 2008 census reported to the United Nations by North Korea, the population shares of these two provinces were only 10% and 3.1%, respectively. So there is clearly a very strong geographic bias in the refugee population. Another issue with the refugee population is the gender ratio. More than 70% of the refugees in South Korea are female, due to the fact many female North Korean refugees are victims of human trafficking rings that either snatch them on the Chinese side of the border or smuggle the women across the border to be sold into forced marriage with Chinese men."

vital in the everyday labor of producing radio shows that cater to the imagined desires and needs of "Myung-hee, a 27-year-old woman living in Chongjin who sells smuggled makeup products in the informal market" or "Myung-sung, a 45-year-old party official living in Pyongyang."

Ⅴ. No Right or Best Way to Do the Job:
The Creative Art of Walking in the Dark

The most basic — and also the most profound — lesson imparted to me from a year at UPI is about the very nature of unification preparation work: there is no 'right' or 'best' way to prepare for Korean unification. What is considered 'effective' and 'urgent' unification preparation work at any given point in time is, in essence, variable and uncertain. For even a single sub-field of the industry (unification media, in UPI's case), there are tens, or even hundreds, of possible actions and directions they may take in the name of preparing for unification. There is not even a single definition for "unification media," as the President of UPI admitted, making it so that there is no clear path that a group engaged in unification media must take moving forward. This ambiguity makes each day, month, and year at UPI a series of creative, self-reflexive moves to work with uncertainty at each step of the murky road that is unification preparation.

As a participant-observer, it almost seemed like each step UPI took had to be taken as if walking in the dark, with no end of the tunnel in sight. There is no universally agreed upon definition, timeline, or rubric on 'preparation' that guides their work, so that the question of productivity or efficacy (or the lack thereof) uneasily hovers over the individual, the institution, and the field. During my time at UPI, I noted that this was the case for both leadership figures and new employees at UPI. The President could never give me a definitive vision for the institution, as he had to take into consideration a broad range of ever-evolving factors. With every swing in domestic politics, change in media trends, or shift in international relations, what would constitute productive, efficacious preparatory work toward Korean unification, in turn, would have to be reworked and

reimagined. Under such macro-contexts of high uncertainty, what should UPI's short-, mid-, long-term goals be, and how would UPI measure success (or failure) at reaching those goals, the President would wonder out loud to me. New staff also struggled to know if their work was making a difference and wondered if any visible change or success would be achievable within their career span. Insecurities about their position in the institution (will my contract be renewed in the new year?), the institution's survival (will our budget be approved next year?), or the field's future (will Korean unification continue to be a relevant social issue?) only added to the uncertainties these new employees regularly experienced, which prompted a number of them to leave UPI after only a year or two.

The most revealing example of how UPI creatively manages these uncertainties of inter-Korean relations in their everyday labor may be its very office space, located in a small four-story building in the largely residential neighborhood of Mangwon-dong in Seoul. When I first set foot into UPI's office, I felt as if I had just walked into a Google office (or at least what I imagined a Google office to look like). Nowhere did I see cubicle desks or white walls, the hallmarks of office space around the world. Without any partitioned sections or private rooms, the whole floor was a large open space that I could scan in one glance. It was beautifully decorated in the "Northern European-style," a popular interior design trend in South Korea of late, with an elegant dark maple table that acted as the grounding centerpiece to the airy open floor plan. Whimsical paintings and green plants enlivened the space with color and personality. Big, panoramic windows brought in tons of natural sunlight into the space, with work counters and high top chairs inviting me to sit by them to take in the urban scenery outside. A giant hammock chair hung from the ceiling where I spotted an employee sitting cross-legged with a laptop perched on her knees. In one corner was the office kitchen with a small fridge and coffee machine, stocked with cookies and crackers, coffee pods and tea bags. Throughout the space, a number of small tables were scattered about for staff to work on their laptops or hold small meetings. A large pine wood bookshelf grabbed my attention, which was overflowing with books not just about North Korea and Korean unification, but popular novels, travel

guides, and bestseller non-fictions. Overall, the space seemed more like a trendy café that I might find all over Seoul.

I discovered that just before I had arrived in Seoul in the fall of 2017, UPI had undertaken a major renovation of its office spaces. According to UPI's President, Mr. Lee, the renovation had a clear purpose beyond aesthetic improvement: the renovation was intended to make the workplace a more collaborative, creative working space, in the spirt of the open office spaces of Facebook, Google, and Apple. His hope was that this change in office layout will improve his staff's performance and increase UPI's competitiveness. Like thousands of workplaces across Seoul, UPI's office once used to be full of cubicles, one designated for each employee. But Mr. Lee had a new vision: he wanted to overcome all the divides that disconnected his 20+ staff into different teams, ranks, and positions in order to level the office culture. He envisioned a new UPI where staff would work together without the usual hierarchies and divisions that are typical of South Korean workplaces. In his vision, no one would have designated desks or seats; they would freely roam the different floors and spontaneously generate new synergies.[43]

Reflecting back on my year at UPI, there was a series of interesting leadership initiatives taken by the President that, at the time, I did not see as part of the same agenda. For instance: why did the recently renovated second floor of UPI look the way it did, a space that looked unlike a typical white-collar office full of cubicles? Why did UPI's President repeatedly speak out against hierarchical office culture that is the norm in South Korea and encourage collaborations across team and rank? Why did he regularly

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43 The twist of this story, I soon found out, was that this office space renovation was met with a not-so-enthusiastic response by UPI staff, who were so used to having their own work cubicle. During my time at UPI, I noted that very few people, in fact, changed where they worked; almost everyone had their 'unofficial' spot where they could be found every day, much to my amusement. The President's office renovation initiative had largely fallen flat, but this was far from the end of his continuous efforts to try to improve his staff's productivity and strengthen UPI's competitiveness.

remind (or warn) his employees to not take for granted their institution's collective survival or their individual job security, even though it seemed to me that doing so could provoke avoidable anxiety? I now understand that UPI's President had been creating (or at least trying to create) the conditions for his staff to thrive in creative uncertainty because the ability to do unification preparation work is, in its essence, the ability to work creatively *with* uncertainty.[44]

Wilf argues that in order to produce workers who are good improvisers thriving under creative uncertainty, there may be various efforts taken by leadership to foster this.[45] From changing the office design to instituting a move toward *chŏnmunsŏng* ("professionalism" and "expertise"), the President was committed to normalizing and naturalizing creative uncertainty as a way-of-work at UPI. Uncertainties pervading UPI — from definition of unification media to funding for next year — created a company-wide ethos that as employees, they must embrace change and professionalism with enthusiasm and creativity and see the possibility for agentive action, even when things appear so uncertain and they are only a small fish in a very, very big pond. These are the dispositions and subjectivities generated and encouraged through unification preparation work, a line of work that favors creative, hopeful, flexible, professional individuals who can thrive in uncertainties. UPI is not a workplace for someone who would be paralyzed when faced with uncertainty; it is a place where uncertainty is part of the everyday fabric and only those who can creatively work *with* it can survive. The President constantly warned his staff of disappearing peer groups that met a fate of organizational stagnation and institutional death; unlike them, UPI will need to constantly challenge itself to be better "change makers," to be more "professional," if it wants to survive into the next quarter, year, and decade.[46]

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44 Eitan Wilf, "The 'Cool' Organization Man: Incorporating Uncertainty from Jazz Music into the Business World," in *Modes of Uncertainty: Anthropological Cases*, ed. Limor Samimian-Darash and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 29-45.

45 *Ibid.*

VI. The Role of Creative Imagination in Uncertain Inter—Korean Relations

Radio broadcasting to North Korea (as a part of "unification media") and the larger project of unification preparation (that "unification media" is a part of) are both genres of professional labor that manage the political and social relations between two Koreas. On the one hand, radio broadcasts produced in South Korea and distributed to North Korea generate mediated sociality between producers and listeners between the two countries. On the other hand, unification preparation is a political national project in South Korea that brings South and North Koreans (in particular, those who have defected from the north) together in imaginatively building a unified and shared future nation. Here, I argue that an important overlap between radio broadcasting and unification preparation is the critical role of imagination and creativity. We have already seen how radio broadcasting across the uncrossable border by radio producers is only made possible by their creative labor of imagination, namely imagining their North Korean listeners in conditions of ignorance. Imagining the North Korean listener is, in turn, part of the larger project of unification preparation that demands South Koreans to creatively imagine a new future nation on the Korean peninsula.

UPI is one of the many South Korean "unification preparation" groups that have emerged in the course of national division, particularly in the last two decades when the democratization movements of the 1980s and 90s have opened up the political and social space for more non-state

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46 The uncertainties of UPI's work were only more highlighted further into Moon's administration, when leaflet dissemination by North Korean defector groups became the public reason for North Korea raising tensions between the two countries in 2020. In turn, there was increasing uncertainty whether the Moon administration may also block radio broadcasting work by groups such as UPI (see Chad O'Carroll, *NK News*, August 11, 2020), while a growing number of groups engaged in North Korea-related work (particularly through the lens of "North Korean human rights") became the target of the Ministry of Unification (see Ha Yoon-Ah, *Daily NK*, July 21, 2020.)

participation. These groups are represented by institutions ranging from government agencies, think tanks, NGOs, churches, to corporations that are united by the common mission of preparing South Korea for future unification with North Korea. Just as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or infectious diseases need to be prepared for in our contemporary world, Korean unification came to be regarded by these South Korean actors as a possibly catastrophic future *scenario* that demands strategic anticipation and professional preparation in the present. The field of unification preparation encompasses a broad, messy range of social actors and political ideologies in both state and non-governmental arenas, from individuals and groups with *bosu* ("conservative") to *jinbo* ("progressive") leanings; from advocates of pro-unification to anti-unification positions; from supporters of rapid unification to gradual unification. It spans groups that are fully dedicated and organized to carry out unification preparation projects to institutions that periodically engage in unification preparation initiatives and partnerships.

<Figure 4> Differences developing on the divided Korean Peninsula

Photo taken by NASA in 2014

What is ultimately involved in the project of unification preparation is the professional labor of creatively imagining a future Unified Korea. This familiar photo of the Korean peninsula at night (see Figure 4) is one of the many representations that highlight the stark differences that have developed between the two Koreas over the seven decades of division. It

also speaks to the challenge that unification preparation professionals face in *imagining* a new future Korea, a new future nation, that can bridge these differences. What will be the new flag, name, currency, or capital of this future nation? How will the different education or healthcare systems be integrated in a Unified Korea? These are only a few of the countless questions that unification preparation professionals ask themselves in their everyday labor of anticipation.

All these creative imaginations must take place even though no one, not even 'the experts,' knows when or how — or even *if*— Korean unification will take place, and there are ongoing differences of opinion on the possibility and/or desirability of Korean unification. Moreover, "unification" (*t'ongil*) in South Korea generally refers to the (future) event and process of politically, geographically re-uniting the two Koreas. However, uncertainty surrounding what this event and process actually refer to (e.g. through sudden war or gradual integration? U.S-style federation or U.N.-style confederation?) makes imagining 'it' a particularly confusing and divisive matter, even among experts and professionals. In other words, every time the word *t'ongil* is invoked by two individuals or groups, it is highly possible that they are referring to different notions. Even though *t'ongil* is the very concept unifying these broad range of actors and activities, it is important to acknowledge the diversities and divergences within this shared ideological, professional universe that make the labor of creative imagination extremely challenging.[47]

As UPI radio producers prepare for unification by sending radio broadcasts to North Korea, they are engaged in a double effort of imagination: imagining the North Korean listener and imagining a Unified Korea. This article thus brings our attention to the central role of

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[47] The concept of "unification" acts as a unifying force because it is inter-discursive across different spaces and among different actors. At the same time, the conceptualization can vary enormously among different users and speakers. This is what makes unification a "cultural" concept in how it is sociolinguistically differentiated and unevenly distributed across the population (see Silverstein 2004).

imagination and creativity in managing uncertain inter-Korean relations, more than seven decades since national division on the Korean peninsula. The former Minister of Unification Cho Myoung Gyon (2017-2019) noted in his email inauguration address on July 4th 2017 that "the beauty of unification work is building an unknown world," likening the Ministry of Unification to a startup that traffics in uncertainty and creativity.[48] Cho suggests that the rewarding — and also the challenging — part of working in the field of unification is the task of trying to forge a future for the Korean peninsula that is complicated by so many unknowns, variables, and uncertainties. In a similar vein, an interlocutor during fieldwork described unification preparation using the four-character Chinese expression 前人未踏. By calling it *chŏninmidabŭi kil* ("a road never walked before"), he mused on the commitment and creativity needed to march forward when there are no easy models and answers to turn to. In other words, I found that unification preparation is experienced by participants to be an unprecedented task of creative imagination. Even though historical lessons from Germany and elsewhere are considered to be informative, I would often hear of the distinctiveness of the Korean case and the unique difficulties facing ahead. "If unifying East and West Germany was like mixing seawater and freshwater, unifying the two Koreas will be like mixing oil and water," said the same interlocutor to stress how difficult the future process will be and how important the role of imagination and creativity are to navigate uncharted territory.

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48 Yonhap News, "Chomyŏnggyun, Not'ai Paekp'aek Ch'ŏt Ch'ulgŭn, "T'ongilbunŭn Pench'ŏgiŏp"" (Cho Myoung Gyon, first day of work without wearing a tie and carrying a backpack, "Ministry of Unification is like a start-up"), July 4, 2017.

<Figure 5> Creativity in unification work

Former Minister of Unification Cho Myoung Gyon (2017~2019):
"The beauty of unification work is building an unknown world." Taken from Ministry of Unification's Facebook page.

In fact, I witnessed during fieldwork countless classroom activities, workshop sessions, or sponsored competitions that are designed to encourage young South Koreans to use their "creativity" and "imagination" to anticipate a Unified Korea. A case in point is the Center for Unified Future of Korea (*hanbando t'ongil mirae sent'ŏ*) that opened up in late 2014 by the Ministry of Unification near the border with North Korea in Yeoncheon county. This Center is designed to produce a theme park-like environment where young visitors — mostly elementary, middle, and high school students on school field trips — can start imagining a Unified Korea. For instance, young visitors are invited to use digital technology to experience what it would be like to travel to the northern half of the peninsula: when visitors stand in front of the green screen, they can see themselves on the screen on the North Korean side of the border (see Figure 6). Through the

creative use of digital technologies, young South Koreans are given the chance to imagine a different future in which movement across the inter-Korean borders becomes possible in their lifetime. And in 2017, the Ministry of Unification hosted the "Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition" that invited university students to creatively imagine business plans for a Unified Korea (see Figure 7). From a plan to set up vending machines that dispense essential medications so that more Koreans in the north will have access to basic healthcare to a proposal to create a smartphone application that will help displaced people and their descendants locate their old hometowns, the competition encouraged a broad range of creative thinking about what kinds of business services and goods will be in demand in a Unified Korea.

<Figure 6> The Center for Unified Future of Korea that opened in 2014

Photos from the websites of the Government of Yeoncheon and the Center for Unified Future of Korea.[49]

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49 For reference, please see: "Attraction Spots in Yeoncheon," Yeoncheon Government, accessed May 27, 2021, https://www.yeoncheon.go.kr/tour/selectTourCntnts WebView.do?tourNo=412&key=4762 and "Center for Unified Korean Future," Ministry of Unification, accessed November 11, 2021, http://unifuture.unikorea.go.kr/.

<Figure 7> "Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition" in 2017

Ministry of Unification poster advertising the 2017 "Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition":
What will you do in a Unified Korea?

In other words, "creativity" and "imagination" have emerged as *the* most critical capacities that are encouraged by field professionals in the project of unification preparation in contemporary South Korea. I argue that creativity and imagination have become the major *t'ongil yŏngyang* (i.e. "unification capacity") promoted by field professionals in their engagement with the general public. *Yŏngyang*, or capacity, is the strength or ability to successfully, effectively carry out a given task. Again and again, I would hear that the ultimate goal of unification preparation work is to strengthen the "unification capacity" of South Korean society so that South Koreans can manage Korean unification as a future event and process that may one day change the very fabric of political-economic, socio-cultural life on the Korean peninsula. And what these field professionals anticipate is that individuals who are capacitated with "imagination" and "creativity" will be the ones to thrive in a Unified Korea.

Why were "creativity" and "imagination" constantly on the lips of field professionals? To some, it may seem that Korean unification is not a future scenario that even demands much creativity and imagination, considering that many major aspects of the future scenario are cautiously left outside of realm of creative imagination in the politically fraught 'post-Cold War' environment of South Korea that continues to enforce the National Security Law, the anti-communist law enforced since 1948 that severely limits ideological freedom in South Korea. In fact, the assumption that Korean unification is based on (abrupt or gradual) spatial integration that will lead to ward the (sudden or eventual) formation of a single nation, based on 'universal,' 'progressive' ideologies of democracy and capitalism, is hardly questioned in both official rhetoric and informal practice in South Korea.

In spite of these caveats, it is "creativity" and "imagination" that have emerged as powerful professional tools to engage young South Koreans with Korean unification. From the Center for Unified Future of Korea to a Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition, what all these venues and mediums nurture and reward is creative thinking and action in imagining what is a highly uncertain future scenario of Korean unification and building an imaginative future nation commonly referred to as "Unified Korea" (*t'ongirhan'guk*). Creative exercises in the futurological building of *T'ongirhan'guk* — "an unknown world," in the words of the former Minister of Unification — involve anticipating future problems and solutions, envisioning alternative sites and icons, and imagining new jobs and businesses.

As a matter of fact, "creativity" and "imagination" have become panacea capacities that are being worshipped in a wide range of domains in South Korea, not only in the field of unification preparation. As Wilf notes:

"Creativity has become a panacea that promises success in various domains and at various levels of social reality, and hence creativity has also become the focus of managerial theories, self-help books, and experts

whose goal is to help individuals, firms, cities, and nation-states harness it as a resource for boosting productivity and creating value."[50]

This is certainly the case in South Korea, where creativity has sparked heated discussions among government officials, HR experts, mothers, and teachers on why South Koreans do not have enough of 'it' and how to promote 'it' in school classrooms and company workshops. If the former Park Geun-hye administration's major slogan for inter-Korean policy was "unification preparation,"[51] her central model in economic policy was "creative economy."

On the one hand, scholars of Korea have astutely noted the rise of creativity in post-IMF neoliberal South Korea as the capacity that new South Korean citizens must be armed with to survive in these new times.[52] On the other hand, anthropologists such as Gershon[53] and Wilf[54] have pointed out that the "ascendance of creativity cannot be set apart from the rise of a 'neoliberal agency' that requires subjects to imagine and fashion their own future by engaging with risk and making decisions under conditions of increased uncertainty."[55] In other words, neoliberal conditions of precarity can create the backdrop for the ascendance of creativity as the panacea capacity in engaging with the uncertain future, whereby individuals are asked to be responsible for managing their own future without the help of states or corporations. A highly uncertain future

50 Eitan Wilf, "Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity,"*Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 406.

51 After taking office, Park soon established the new "Presidential Committee on Unification Preparation" (PCUP) in 2014, bringing together state and non-state leaders to prepare the nation for the possibility of Korean unification.

52 In-Soo Choe, "Creativity: A Sudden Rising Star in Korea," in The International Handbook of Creativity, eds. James Kaufman and Robert Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press. 2006), 395-420.

53 Illana Gershon, "Neoliberal Agency," *Current Anthropology* 52 no. 4 (2011): 537-555.

54 Eitan Wilf, *Creativity on Demand: The Dilemmas of Innovation in an Accelerated Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

55 Eitan Wilf, "Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 407.

scenario such as Korean unification and a highly unpredictable geopolitical context such as inter-Korean relations, then, offers a highly fertile ground for creativity to ascend as the panacea capacity and explains why it has come to be embraced and promoted by field professionals not only in their own work, but also for the young generation.

VII. Looking Forward: The Future of Radio Broadcasting to North Korea

Radio broadcasting to North Korea continues to be a major part of UPI's work in unification media, but there are ongoing uncertainties over whether radio will remain as the most effective or feasible platform for engaging North Korea/ns moving forward into the future. For instance, if relations between the two Koreas improve to the point that free movement of people across the DMZ becomes possible, UPI's President dreams of opening a second headquarters in Pyongyang, which will in turn entail a whole new set of goals and projects that may make radio broadcasts irrelevant or done completely differently. As the contemporary world increasingly gravitates toward video for information and entertainment (e.g. television, YouTube), one of UPI's institutional priorities in recent years has been to increase its video production staff. In particular, if the political and technological environment on the Korean peninsula changes so that satellite television to North Korea becomes possible, UPI's President is considering registering UPI as a Television "PP" (program provider) in South Korea and shifting UPI's weight from radio to video production entirely. However, the President remains hesitant because he cannot possibly predict how the media environment in North Korea will change in the next month or year or decade, an uncertain future that hinges on the North Korean regime's shifting stances and policies concerning the control of media access of its people. In the meantime, unless the media environment in North Korea changes such that ordinary North Koreans have access to unrestricted Internet connections or satellite television devices, there is little rationale for UPI to invest more man-hours to create

video content that North Koreans cannot view. For now, UPI's video content is uploaded to UPI's website and YouTube channel, in the hopes that North Korean foreign laborers, exchange students, and diplomat officers can secretly view them during their time abroad.

Finally, as of 2018, most of UPI's annual operational budget to carry out radio broadcasting to North Korea comes from U.S. groups that have vested interests in the spread of pro-American democracy and capitalism to North Korea. However, there is sobering recognition among radio PDs at UPI that this funding situation may all change if North Korea no longer becomes a priority status for the U.S.'s national security. Much to their dismay, radio broadcasting to North Korea may suddenly become impossible due to lack of funding. Among UPI's leadership and staff, I observed widespread anxiety about whether UPI will continue to be funded by the U.S., or if a new administration in the U.S. may mean the end of funding for UPI. In fact, my interlocutors' concerns over the new Trump administration turned out to be true when there was news coming out of Washington that Trump wanted to cut funding to groups such as NED.[56]

This article has explored what invisible radio waves sent across the borders can reveal about the relations between two nations that remain precariously mired between peace and war. The challenges and uncertainties of inter-Korean relations can only be concretely experienced by social actors situated in particular institutions and roles. Radio PDs at UPI are at the frontlines of managing the on-the-ground realities of inter-Korean relations in their everyday labor of media production and unification preparation. In this article, I have explained how creativity has risen to become one of the most critical capacities that are valued in their line of work. In managing relations between two nations that are considered challenging and unpredictable even by the most seasoned experts, imagination comes to the rescue.

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56 Josh Rogin, "The Trump Administration Wants to Dismantle Ronald Reagan's 'Infrastructure of Democracy,'" *Washington Post*, March 4, 2018.

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