

David Guttenfelder, a photographer for the *Associated Press*, has sparked what might be one of the most illuminating glimpses into everyday North Korean society.

Guttenfelder, cell phone in-hand, has been uploading photos of real-time Pyongyang straight from his phone to his Instagram account, while on an assignment in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Prior to January 2013, all visitors and tourists were prohibited from any type of cell phone use — upon arrival into the country, all cellular devices were initially confiscated at customs, making it nearly impossible for foreigners to have any contact with the outside world while in North Korea.

This, however, has changed. The bigwigs of the Democratic Republic recently changed their policy on cell phone use in the country, enacting a relatively lax policy for visitors to the country with cell phones. They even flipped on a visitor-only 3G network that is allegedly not state-run or filtered in any way. This service is, predictably, inaccessible for the North Korean population.

This has made it easier than ever for visitors to utilize social media platforms while in North Korea. Through his simple, untreated photos of North Korean streets, statues and homes, Guttenfelder has begun to expose the nature of everyday life in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, through the use of his iPhone.

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Through the global platform of social media, Guttenfelder has been able to reveal images such as dismal, dark mornings in Pyongyang after widespread power shortages; candid photos of the North Korean police force going skating at a local ice rink; and, most shockingly, daycare centres playing military propaganda cartoons.

What the photographer is ultimately doing, with the help of Instagram, is painting a more detailed image of North Korea, one that challenges our usual conceptions of the nation as a repressed, industrial wasteland. Amid the snapshots of indistinct concrete and empty shopfronts, there are also images of vibrancy and humanity: colourful folk dances, roller-blading children and a marriage.

The fact that Guttenfelder is also able to “check in,” or tag his location on Instagram, is helping create a more defined and attuned image of what was once the blank slate of our North Korean map. Though many areas of North Korea have been identified by such services as Google Maps, many

corners of the nation remain shrouded in mystery. By uploading photos of everyday Pyongyang and surrounding areas, Guttenfelder is opening not only his Instagram followers, but also the rest of the world, to a new perspective of North Korea.

What really gets me, though, is how Guttenfelder has used such a simple and ubiquitous tool to this great an effect. It seems so effortless — many people in the Western world, myself included, use Instagram on a daily basis. The fact that Guttenfelder is able to expose the daily minutiae of arguably the most repressed authoritarian regime in the modern world through a free iPhone application is nothing short of mind-boggling.

One question remains, though. *Why?* Why is the North Korean government — no stranger to repression, both political and social — allowing visitors to the nation to do this? Why is the notorious Party of the DPRK, enforcers of state-run internet as well as highly state-controlled tours of the country for foreigners, allowing Guttenfelder and others to come into the country and document everyday life for the world to see?

The Party is obviously aware of what Guttenfelder is doing. They have eyes and ears all over the country. Why, then, is no one coming forward and stopping him? Though the vantage point of visitors to the DPRK remains limited, the freedom to use cell phone photography in the country offers us an absolutely unprecedented view of the nation. So, what gives?

In my eyes, there is only one explanation as to why the North Korean Party, with its intense media regulations on both domestic and foreign media content, would allow for everyday life in the capital to be released into the world via social media: they must be getting something out of it. What “it” is, we have no way of knowing — still, it seems naïve to suggest that the DPRK government is offering this personal agency to tourists for selfless reasons.

This real-time Instagram exposure of North Korea is beginning to paint a more detailed and defined picture of the nation and its inhabitants.

Though I am more than a bit skeptical as to the motive behind it all, one thing is for sure: things are slowly, but surely, changing in North Korea. Though these snapshots may not be enough to spark a full-scale uprising, I am excited to see the inevitable changes they bring about on a national and global level. Just look at the Arab spring — these days, an iPhone is more than enough to start a revolution. **P**

Capturing North Korea

How Instagram is giving us a glimpse into the world's most repressed nation

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