

The Media's Brazen Dishonesty About North Korean Nuclear Violations

Press irresponsibly relies on single-source report to accuse Kim of breaking an agreement he never made.

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Featured image: President Trump and North Korean President Kim Jong Un shake hands in summit room, June 12, 2018. (Office of the President of the United States/Public Domain)

In late June and early July, NBC News, CNN, and The Wall Street Journal published stories that appeared at first glance to shed a lurid light on Donald Trump's flirtation with Kim Jong-un. They contained satellite imagery showing that North Korea was [making rapid upgrades](#) to its nuclear weapons complex at Yongbyon and [expanding its missile production program](#) just as Trump and Kim were getting chummy at their Singapore summit.

In fact, those media outlets were selling journalistic snake oil. By misrepresenting the diplomatic context of the images they were hyping, the press launched a false narrative around the Trump-Kim summit and the negotiations therein.

The headline of the June 27 NBC News story revealed the network's political agenda on the Trump-Kim negotiations.

"If North Korea is denuclearizing," it asked, "why is it expanding a nuclear research center?"

The piece warned that North Korea "continues to make improvements to a major nuclear facility, raising questions about President Donald Trump's claim that Kim Jong Un has agreed to disarm, independent experts tell NBC News."

CNN's coverage of the same story was even more sensationalist, [declaring](#) that there were "troubling signs" that North Korea was making "improvements" to its nuclear facilities, some of which it said had been carried out *after* the Trump-Kim summit. It pointed to a facility that had produced plutonium in the past and recently undergone an upgrade, despite Kim's alleged promise to Trump to draw down his nuclear arsenal. CNN commentator Max Boot cleverly spelled out the supposed implication:

"If you were about to demolish your house, would you be remodeling the

kitchen?”

But in their determination to push hardline opposition to the negotiations, these stories either ignored or sought to discredit the careful caveat accompanying the original source on which they were based—the analysis of satellite images [published on the website 38 North](#) on June 21. The three analysts who had written that the satellite images “indicated that improvements to the infrastructure at North Korea’s Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center are continuing at a rapid pace” also cautioned that this work “should not be seen as having any relationship to North Korea’s pledge to denuclearize.”

If the authors’ point was not clear enough, Joel Wit, the founder of 38 North, who helped negotiate the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea and then worked on its implementation for several years, explained to NBC News:

“What you have is a commitment to denuclearize—we don’t have the deal yet, we just have a general commitment.”

Wit added that he didn’t “find it surprising at all” that work at Yongbyon was continuing.

In a briefing for journalists by telephone on Monday, Wit was even more vigorous in denouncing the stories that had hyped the article on 38 North.

“I really disagree with the media narrative,” Wit said. “The Singapore summit declaration didn’t mean North Korea would stop its activities in the nuclear and missile area right away.”

He recalled the fact that, during negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviets over arms control, “both sides continued to build weapons until the agreement was completed.”

Determined to salvage its political line on the Trump-Kim talks, NBC News turned to Jeffrey Lewis, director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, who has insisted all along that North Korea won’t give up its nuclear weapons.

“We have never had a deal,” Lewis said. “The North Koreans never offered to give up their nuclear weapons. Never. Not once.”

Lewis had apparently forgotten that the October 2005 Six Party joint statement included language that the DPRK had “committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons....”

Another witness NBC found to support its view was James Acton, co-director of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who declared,

“If [the North Koreans] were serious about unilaterally disarming, of course they would have stopped work at Yongbyon.”

That was true but misleading, because North Korea has always been unambiguously clear

that its offer of denuclearization is conditional on reciprocal steps by the United States.

On July 1, a few days after those stories appeared, the *Wall Street Journal* [headlined](#), “New satellite imagery indicates Pyongyang is pushing ahead with weapons programs even as it pursues dialogue with Washington.” The lead paragraph called it a “major expansion of a key missile-manufacturing plant.”

But the shock effect of the story itself was hardly seismic. It turns out that the images of a North Korean solid-fuel missile manufacturing facility at Hamhung showed that new buildings had been added beginning in the early spring, after Kim Jong-un had called for more production of solid-fuel rocket engines and warhead tips last August. The construction of the exterior of some buildings was completed “around the time” of the Trump-Kim summit meeting, according to the analysts at the James Martin Center of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies.

So the most Pyongyang could be accused of was going ahead with a previously planned expansion while it was just beginning to hold talks with the United States.

The satellite images were analyzed by Jeffrey Lewis, the director whom had just been quoted by NBC in support of its viewpoint that North Korea had no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons. So it is no surprise that the Martin Center’s David Schmerler, who also participated in the analysis of the images, told the *Journal*,

“The expansion of production infrastructure for North Korea’s solid missile infrastructure probably suggests that Kim Jong Un does not intend to abandon his nuclear and missile programs.”

But when this writer spoke with Schmerler last week, he admitted that the evidence of Kim’s intentions regarding nuclear and missile programs is much less clear. I asked him if he was sure that North Korea would refuse to give up its ICBM program as part of a broader agreement with the Trump administration.

“I’m not sure,” Schmerler responded, adding, “They haven’t really said they’re willing to give up ICBM program.”

That is true, but they haven’t rejected that possibility either—presumably because the answer will depend on what commitments Trump is willing to make to the DPRK.

These stories of supposed North Korean betrayal by NBC, CNN, and the *Wall Street Journal* are egregious cases of distorting news by pushing a predetermined policy line. But those news outlets, far from being outliers, are merely reflecting the norms of the entire corporate news system.

The stories of how North Korea is now violating an imaginary pledge by Kim to Trump in Singapore are even more outrageous, because big media had previously peddled the opposite line: that Kim at the Singapore Summit made no firm commitment to give up his nuclear weapons and that the “agreement” in Singapore was the weakest of any thus far.

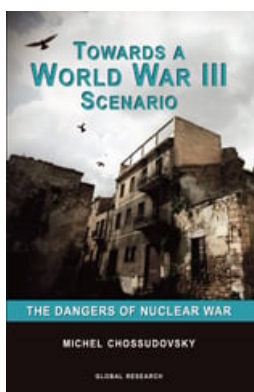
That claim, which blithely ignored the fundamental distinction between a brief summit meeting statement and past formal agreements with North Korea that took months to reach,

was a media maneuver of unparalleled brazenness. And big media have since topped that feat of journalistic legerdemain by claiming that North Korea has demonstrated bad faith by failing to halt all nuclear and missile-related activities.

A media complex so determined to discredit negotiations with North Korea and so unfettered by political-diplomatic reality seriously threatens the ability of the United States to deliver on any agreement with Pyongyang. That means alternative media must make more aggressive efforts to challenge the corporate press's coverage.

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-Ellen Brown, author of 'Web of Debt' and president of the Public Banking Institute



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