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An Act of War? *The Interview* Affair, the Sony Hack, and the Hollywood/Washington Power Nexus Today

An early quasi-police procedural showing J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation "smashing" a communist sleeper cell in Boston, Alfred L. Werker's 1952 docudrama *Walk East on Beacon* looks at first much like any other Red-baiting Hollywood production of the McCarthy era. On closer inspection, the movie offers us a keen insight into the Hollywood/Washington power nexus during the Cold War. Recently declassified documents reveal that the FBI's top brass not only helped to inspire *Walk East on Beacon* but also to cast and market the film. More intriguingly, America's most powerful military Cold War think tank, the RAND Corporation, was at the heart of the movie's screenplay. Hollywood scriptwriter Leo Rosten worked as a part-time adviser on social sciences for RAND and based key elements of his plot for *Walk East on Beacon* on top-secret RAND projects, principally the military uses of satellites and computers. Rosten's dual role is a perfect illustration of what historians have come to refer to as America's Cold War "state-private network," an intricate, semi-secret complex that operated highly effectively outside of official channels through informal links between government and civil society and which played such an important part in the United States' ideological and cultural battle with Soviet communism.¹

¹ Janet Farrell Brodie, "Learning Secrecy in the Early Cold War: The RAND Corporation," *Diplomatic History* Volume 35, No 4 (September 2011), 643-670; Helen Laville and Hugh Wilford, eds., *The U.S. Government, Citizen Groups and the Cold War: The State-Private Network* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Six decades later, in 2014, the link between Hollywood and the RAND Corporation surfaced again, though this time more publically. In June that year, North Korean government officials threatened a “resolute and merciless” response against the United States unless President Barack Obama banned *The Interview*, a Columbia Pictures comedy financed by the Japanese media conglomerate Sony that depicted the assassination of the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. In the ensuing six-month-long controversy, which was sharpened by the publication of thousands of hacked Sony emails by a mysterious group called the Guardians of Peace, it emerged that Sony Entertainment Inc.’s CEO, Michael Lynton, was not only a member of the RAND board but that one of RAND’s Korean experts had informed him of *The Interview*’s potential for destabilising Kim Jong-un’s regime. Thickening the plot further, other hacked Sony emails and sources suggested close connections between Michael Lynton and U.S. State Department propaganda officials. Though these revelations generally got lost in the Western media amid increasingly angry allegations of North Korean bullying and cyber terrorism, they raised important questions about *The Interview*’s political intentions and about America’s security state-entertainment complex in the early twenty-first century.

Linked to the myriad propaganda dimensions of the Global War on Terror, much work has been done over the last decade or so into how and why the Hollywood/Washington power nexus has constructed themes and theories of American foreign policy imperatives and necessity in the way it has.² An equally vibrant body of

² Jean-Michel Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington: The Movies and National Security, From World War II to the Present Day* (London: Anthem Press, 2005); Klaus Dodds, “Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror,” *Third World Quarterly*

scholarship has focused on the role that the American entertainment industry, including film, plays as a tool of U. S. “soft power” or as an instrument of U. S. public diplomacy.³ A third, related set of studies has explored the role of international markets in shaping the politics of Hollywood.⁴ This article integrates all three of these developing and important fields via a detailed, empirical case-study of *The Interview* affair.

Volume 29, No 8 (2008), 1621-1637; Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality Politics, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006); Matthew Alford, *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2010); Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (London: Wiley, 2010).

³ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Volume 616, No 1 March 2008, 94-109; Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Philip Seib, ed., *Towards a New Public Diplomacy: Redirecting U. S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴ Frederick Wasser, “Is Hollywood America? The Transnationalization of the American Film Industry,” in Steven J. Ross, ed., *Movies and Americana Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 345-366; Stanley Rosen, “The Wolf at the Door: Hollywood and the Film Market in China,” in Eric J. Heikkila and Rafael Pizarro, eds., *Southern California and the World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 49-78; Terry Flew, “Entertainment Media, Cultural Power, and Post-globalization: The Case of China’s International Media Expansion and the Discourse of Soft Power,” *Global Media and China*, July 2016, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2059436416662037>

Using the leaked Sony emails as key sources, the article argues that, while Pyongyang was wrong to label *The Interview* as an “act of war” by the American government, the movie was part of an informal network linking Hollywood executives with U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy advisers. While most American government agencies today have entertainment liaison offices that work formally with Hollywood studios, the Sony emails suggest that, as was the case with the “state-private network” during the Cold War, a significant amount of the political messaging that occurs in U.S. popular culture is accomplished outside of this framework, namely through the private communications of well-placed individuals with shared interests who prefer to hide their connection lest they be accused of propaganda or censorship. At the same time, *The Interview* affair sharply demonstrates the challenges that international media conglomerates face when politically-charged material cuts across their increasingly globalized commercial interests. As we shall see, when navigating *The Interview*’s post-production and theatrical release, Sony found itself caught between those in Japan, China and South Korea who claimed the movie would seriously endanger Asian relations and the many Americans (including Barack Obama) who interpreted attempts to neuter it as appeasement. The article shows how the Sony hack transformed *The Interview* from a gross-out farce into a powerful symbol of Western artistic freedom, but concludes by questioning whether *The Interview* affair was as much of a defeat for Pyongyang in its long-running propaganda war with the United States as many might think.

***The Interview*’s development**

For readers who have not seen it, *The Interview* revolves around an American television journalist, Dave Skylark (James Franco), and his producer, Aaron Rapport (Seth Rogen). The pair is recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to assassinate Kim Jong-un (Randall Park) after receiving an invitation to interview the Supreme Leader in North Korea. When Skylark meets Kim, he finds him surprisingly endearing and refuses to carry out the kill mission. By the film's conclusion, however, it is clear that Kim is nothing more than a savvy media manipulator, a cruel tyrant, and a dangerous, mentally unbalanced megalomaniac. Millions of his people are malnourished and 200,000 are in prison camps, while the regime spends \$800 million a year on nuclear weapons. When Kim learns of an internal coup planned by his propaganda chief, he attempts to launch a nuclear attack against the West to restore his power, only to be killed by Skylark and Rapport, thereby bringing about democratic regime-change in North Korea.

Pyongyang's condemnation of *The Interview* as an American "act of war" in June 2014 was in many respects hardly surprising.⁵ By this point in time, relations between the North Korean and U.S. governments had effectively been frozen for six decades. The profound ideological differences between communist North Korea and the capitalist United States, the Korean War of the 1950s (which had partly prompted *Walk East on Beacon* and seen North Korea decimated by UN aerial bombing), the historic political divide between North and South Korea, the presence of 30,000 American troops in

⁵ Justin McCurry, "North Korea Threatens 'Merciless' Response Over Seth Rogen Film," *Guardian*, June 25, 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/25/north-korea-merciless-response-us-kim-jong-un-film.

South Korea, and Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions are among the most important causes of tensions.⁶ Over the years, each country has utilised a combination of words, sounds and images designed to stiffen national resolve, woo neutrals overseas and sow discord in the enemy's camp. Film has been an integral part of this propaganda battle, not least because of Hollywood's global reach and the importance successive North Korean leaders have afforded cinema as a tool of entertainment and persuasion. Kim Jong-il, leader from 1994-2011, even invented his own theory of the cinema and, particularly in his later years, oversaw a number of films that portrayed the United States as *akuyonsang* ('the source of evil').⁷ For its part, Washington has largely been able to rely on the U.S. media, including Hollywood, to consistently portray North Korea as a rogue, "mad and bad" state, headed by mentally unstable dictators who threaten the free world, while lending discreet support to South Korea's long-running campaign of psychological warfare aimed at removing the Kims from power. Washington has invested so much in the battle for North Korean hearts and minds partly because

⁶ Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea-U.S. Relations under Kim Jong-il* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁷ Kim Jong-il, *On the Art of the Cinema* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publicity House, 1973); Jamie Shinhee Lee, "North Korea, South Korea, and *007 Die Another Day*," *Critical Discourse Studies* Volume 4, No 2 (August 2007), 208; Johannes Schönherr, *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012); Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

opinion polls have consistently shown that the American public has no stomach for U.S. military action against Pyongyang,⁸

Judging from official statements, Pyongyang has grown increasingly sensitive to Western filmic depictions of North Korea over the past decade or so, presumably reaction in part to President George W. Bush's January 2002 designation of North Korea as part of an "Axis of Evil."⁹ Most American journalists and politicians have characterised such statements as evidence of Pyongyang's dangerous irrationality. In 2002, North Korean officials called for the banning of the James Bond movie *Die Another Day*, which centred on a delusional North Korean villain dealing nuclear weapons, and accused the U.S. of using such movies to spread "abnormality, degeneration, violence

⁸ Hugh Gusterson, "Paranoid, Potbellied Stalinist Gets Nuclear Weapons: How the US Print Media Cover North Korea," *The Nonproliferation Review* Volume 15, No 8 (2008), 21-42; Andy Greenberg, "The Plot To Free North Korea With Smuggled Episodes of 'Friends'," *Wired*, March 1, 2015, www.wired.com/2015/03/north-korea/?mbid=social_twitter; Scott Snyder, "North Korea: Engaging a Hermit Adversarial State," in Geoffrey Wiseman, ed., *Isolate or Engage: Adversarial States, U.S Foreign Policy, and Public Diplomacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 104-105; Jibum Kim, Carl Gershenson, Jaeki Jeong and Tom W. Smith, "How Americans Think about North Korea, 2000-2007," *Public Opinion Quarterly* Volume 72, No 4 (Winter 2008), 804-821.

⁹ Kim et al., "How Americans Think about North Korea," 804.

and fin de siècle corrupt sex culture.”¹⁰ Two years later, North Korean diplomats lobbied for the outlawing of Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s *Team America: World Police*, which lampooned Kim Jong-il as an insecure megalomaniac who was secretly an alien cockroach.¹¹ In 2012 and 2013 respectively, Hollywood’s *Red Dawn* and *Olympus Has Fallen* both portrayed archetypal North Korean terrorists bringing their threats directly to America. Rather than taking offense on this occasion, Pyongyang instead acted more creatively and used footage from the films to produce online videos affirming the prowess of its military.¹²

Despite Pyongyang’s protestations, no evidence has emerged that any of these films were Western government creations. The same holds true for *The Interview*. However, because of its depiction of Kim Jong-un’s death and North Korea’s dramatic response to the film, *The Interview* certainly represents an escalation in the propaganda war between the two countries. Likewise, there are signs aplenty that artistry and

¹⁰ Lee Hyo-won, “5 Films Besides ‘The Interview’ That North Korea Has Condemned,” *Hollywood Reporter*, June 27, 2014, www.yahoo.com/movies/five-films-besides-the-interview-that-north-korea-has-90067784542.html; Lee, “*Die Another Day*,” 214.

¹¹ Leslie Felperin, “Plastic Explosives,” *Sight & Sound* Volume 15, No 1 (January 2005), 36-37, 68; WENN, “North Korea Calls For Team America Ban,” *Contactmusic.com*, February 7, 2005, www.contactmusic.com/team-america/news/north-korea-call-for-team-america-ban.

¹² Hyo-won, *Ibid.* Interestingly, the terrorists in *Red Dawn* had been changed in post-production from Chinese to North Koreans to avoid damage at China’s lucrative box office. J. Hoberman, “The North Koreans Are Coming,” *Film Comment*, November-December 2012, 52-54, 56.

commerce combined with politics and propaganda in *The Interview*'s case, even if the U.S. government did not have a direct or heavy hand in making the film. According to the chief creative force behind *The Interview*, Seth Rogen, he and co-director Evan Goldberg developed the idea for the movie in the late 2000s, joking about what would happen if a journalist were asked to assassinate a world leader like Kim Jong-il. This idea partly came about after reading old newspaper reports about Mike Wallace, the host of the U.S. television show *60 Minutes*, interviewing Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, and hearing that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had been a fan of Western movies. When, in late 2011, the 28-year-old Kim Jong-un took over from his aged father as North Korea's Supreme Leader, Rogen and Goldberg believed that they now had the perfect dictator for their script. They reckoned it would be more humorous to base the film around someone of their own age, and that Kim Jong-un seemed to be the sort of ruler who might indeed want to open up the notorious "Hermit Kingdom" to select foreign journalists. Kim had been educated in Switzerland and was rumoured to be fascinated with Western pop culture. Rogen and Goldberg were delighted when Kim shocked Western media by inviting the famous American basketballer Dennis Rodman to his private North Korean island in February 2013, as it seemed to make the premise of their film more realistic and therefore more marketable.¹³

¹³ Email from Ileen Reich to Seth Rogen et al October 1, 2014. Available at the Sony Archive on Wikileaks.org. Email ID: 28559; Josh Eels, "Seth Rogen's 'Interview': Inside The Film That North Korea Really Doesn't Want You To See," *Rolling Stone*, December 17, 2014, www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/seth-rogen-interview-north-korea-controversy-cover-story-20141217.

The all-important scripting of *The Interview* was done by Rogen, Goldberg and Dan Sterling in the winter of 2013-2014. The latter, who had worked on a number of television sitcoms including Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *South Park*, as well as the popular news/comedy program, *The Daily Show*, was recruited to add political relevance and satirical bite to Rogen and Goldberg's stock-in-trade crude humor.¹⁴ Initially, the thinking was that Kim Jong-un should not be identified by name for commercial and political reasons, but this changed after the scriptwriters' talks with Sony Pictures Entertainment (SPE) executives and a team of comedians and actors including Jonah Hill and Sacha Baron Cohen. This was a significant decision, and one that added to later charges that *The Interview* was designed to destabilize North Korea. At the time, Sacha Baron Cohen and others argued that using Kim Jong-un's name would make the film "funnier and more interesting;" Dwight Caines, head of worldwide marketing at SPE, thought that having "a couple of inept James Bonds" recruited by the CIA to "kill the most notorious guy on the planet" would be "bold" and "fun with a dash of smarts."¹⁵ Inevitably there were limits to how bold Sony was prepared to be,

¹⁴ Rogen and Goldberg's previous films included *Superbad* (2007), *Pineapple Express* (2008) and *This Is The End* (2013).

¹⁵ Melissa Maroff, "The Interview: An 'Act of War'," *Creative Screenwriting*, December 28, 2014, <http://creativescreenwriting.com/the-interview-an-act-of-war/>; Shelli Weinstein, "Seth Rogen: Censoring North Korea in 'The Interview' 'Seemed Wrong,'" *Variety*, February 5, 2015, www.yahoo.com/movies/s/seth-rogen-censoring-north-korea-interview-seemed-wrong-002637350.html; Email from Dwight Caines to Seth Rogen on May 13, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 42712.

however, which might explain why *The Interview* was preferred to the first movie's first putative title, the highly provocative, Tarantino-esque *Kill Kim Jong Un*.¹⁶

During the scripting and production process, Rogen, Goldberg and Sterling did a surprising amount of research given that they were making a comedy and not a documentary demanding rigorous attention to historical accuracy. Sterling, for instance, read the recently-published, best-selling accounts of life in North Korea, Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* and Shin Dong-hyuk's *Escape from Camp 14*. According to Sterling and Goldberg, the point of this research was to make the scenes set in North Korea look and feel as believable as possible (from the landscape to the buttons on the soldiers' uniforms), but the anti-Pyongyang bent of so much of the literature they used inevitably colored the scripts.¹⁷ Research brought the filmmakers into contact with a

¹⁶ Weinstein, "Seth Rogen," *Variety*, 5 February 2015, www.yahoo.com/movies/s/seth-rogen-censoring-north-korea-interview-seemed-wrong-002637350.html.

¹⁷ Jennifer W. Wood, "Dan Sterling, *The Interview* Writer At The Center Of The Hack, Speaks Out," *Esquire*, December 17, 2014, www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/interviews/a31646/dan-sterling-the-interview-sony-hack/; Matt Goldberg, "Sony To Digitally Alter THE INTERVIEW To Remove Military Buttons; May Also Cut Face-Melting Scene," *Collider.com*, August 13, 2014, <http://collider.com/the-interview-movie-digitally-altered/>. On the recent boom in, and credibility of, books by or about North Korean defectors see Charles K. Armstrong, "Trends in the Study of North Korea," *Journal of Asian Studies* Volume 70, No 2 (May 2011), 337-371. On US "state-private" funding for North Korean defector memoirs as "weaponized forms of

range of interested parties. Rogen claims he “talked to people in the government whose job it is to associate with North Korea or be experts on it.”¹⁸ He is also on record as saying that both a retired CIA officer and someone who had worked closely with former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had seen and consulted on *The Interview*’s script, with the latter calling it “disturbing but funny.” In an interview with *The New York Times*, Rogen also declared that he consulted with several government officials over the course of the film, many of whom he suspected were connected to the CIA.¹⁹

We must be wary of attributing too much credence to these statements of Rogen’s, which might have been intended merely to boost publicity for *The Interview*. That said, the CIA has made strenuous efforts to strengthen its screen image since establishing a Hollywood liaison officer in the mid-1990s and movie producers have hired a number of ex-CIA officers as advisers on prestigious projects. The Oscar-winning *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo*, both released in 2012, are just two dramas that have recently been made in close collaboration with the CIA.²⁰ For its part, the State Department has a

expression” see Christine Hong, “Manufacturing Dissidence: Arts and letters of North Korea’s ‘Second Culture’,” *Positions: Asia Critique*, Volume 23, No 4 (2015), 743-784.

¹⁸ Email from Michael Lynton to Gary Ginsberg on June 25, 2014. Ibid, Email ID: 129851.

¹⁹ Email from Keith Weaver to Marisa Liston on July 14, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 109275; Dave Izkoff, “James Franco and Seth Rogen Talk About ‘The Interview’,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/movies/james-franco-and-seth-rogen-talk-about-the-interview.html?_r=0.

²⁰ Tony Shaw and Tricia Jenkins, “From Zero to Hero: The CIA at the Movies Today,” *Cinema Journal* Volume 56, No 2 (Winter 2017), 91-113.

long, if checkered history of advising Hollywood on how it can best serve U.S. interests overseas stretching back to before World War II.²¹ While running the State Department between 2009 and 2013, Hillary Clinton was a vociferous critic of North Korea and a great advocate of U.S. “smart power” (combining hard and soft power resources), including Hollywood movies. When pressed by journalists in December 2014, a spokesperson for the State Department admitted that one of its top officials, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russel, had talked with Sony executives about *The Interview* at some point.²²

As work on *The Interview*'s script matured towards the end of 2013, official interest in the movie grew, including outside the U.S. As a result, some Sony executives began raising alarm bells, thus demonstrating the difficulties involved in navigating the political and commercial aspects of a film like *The Interview* in multiple territories.

²¹ Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Paul Swann, “The Little State Department: Hollywood and the State Department in the Postwar World,” *American Studies International* Volume 29, No 1 (April 1991), 2-19; Kyoko Hirano, *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo: Japanese Cinema under the American Occupation, 1945-1952* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

²² Nicholas J. Cull, “The End of the Hillary Clinton Era in US Public Diplomacy,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 9 (2013), 1-4; U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, December 17, 2014, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/12/235370.htm#DEPARTMENT.

Indeed, as many film scholars have articulated, the capital-intensive nature of Hollywood films often means that movies must attract either a large domestic audience or several multinational ones in order to recoup costs²³ and consequently, for economic reasons alone, transnational concerns about a film's foreign reception cannot be ignored. In the specific case of China and Japan, concerns about a film's reception are further increased because the two countries rank as the first and second largest film markets outside of North America.²⁴ Hollywood studios have therefore eagerly attempted to capture a larger part of these markets' box office revenues, but the process is particularly complicated in China by the fact that all films being considered for screening there must have their content approved by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, which, as Kimberly Owczarski puts it, is "a nebulous authorization process" at best.²⁵

In light of this, it is unsurprising that in October of 2013, head of international marketing at SPE, Nigel Clark, sent the script of *The Interview* to the company's point

²³ M. Mehdi Semati & Patty J. Sotirin, "Hollywood's Transnational Appeal: Hegemony and Democratic Potential?" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* Volume 26, No 4 (2009), 176-188.

²⁴ Kimberly Owczarski, "'A Very Significant Chinese Component': Securing the Success of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* in China," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Forthcoming 2017.

²⁵ Ibid.

man in Beijing, Li Chow, for his opinion on how the Chinese government would react to the film. Chow noted that China had recently distanced itself from North Korea and consequently that Sony was unlikely to get hurt in the region by making *The Interview*. Chow nonetheless stressed how “reactionary” and “unpredictable” the Chinese government was, and how angered it would be by a section of the film that showed the American protagonists sneaking into North Korea from China (and thereby hinting at Beijing’s support for western efforts to destabilize Pyongyang). In fact, the border between China and North Korea had long been disputed, and Beijing had recently become highly concerned about the economic problems posed by increasing numbers of North Korean refugees coming across the border caused by instability in Pyongyang.²⁶ Sony appears to have taken Chow’s concerns to heart. In *The Interview*’s final cut, Skylark and Rapport enter North Korea in plain sight via a commercial flight to Pyongyang.²⁷

²⁶ Email from Li Chow to Nigel Clark on November 1, 2013. Ibid., Email ID: 205220; Jooyoung Song, “Understanding China’s Response to North Korea’s Provocations,” *Asian Survey* Volume 51, No 6 (November/December 2011), 1134-1155.

²⁷ There is a long history of Hollywood doctoring material in order to avoid upsetting the Chinese government or market. Back in 1933, for instance, prisoner-of-war scenes in Frank Capra’s Chinese Civil War drama, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, were shortened after vociferous complaints from Washington-based Chinese officials. See Eric Smootin, *Regarding Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies, 1930-1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 51-75.

Six months later, after *The Interview*'s filming, further problems arose, this time over release dates. In May 2014, Keith Weaver, SPE's executive vice president of government affairs, alerted his seniors to the fact that *The Interview*'s scheduled release date across large parts of the world, October 10, coincided with Foundation Day in North Korea.²⁸ This was one of the country's most important national holidays and involved ceremonies and weapons displays around the Worker's Party Monument in Pyongyang – the very place, it so happens, from where a missile was to be (and is) fired in the opening scene of *The Interview*. This "couldn't be a better way to antagonize Kim Jong Un," noted SPE's senior vice president of international distribution, Steven O'Dell, who was particularly concerned by the knock-on effects in Moscow, noting that "N. Korea and Russia [are] currently very cozy."²⁹ Sun Yong Hwang, SPE's managing director in Tokyo, did not appear as worried. "Do you think there will be a possibility that Kim Jun Eun [sic] may launch missiles to our office if we release it?" he jokingly asked O'Dell, referring to showing *The Interview* in Japan.³⁰ This levity may have stemmed from Hwang's knowledge that *The Interview* would likely never release in that country, partly because R-rated American comedies rarely did good business in Japan but mainly because of the movie's "inappropriate" theme.³¹

²⁸ Email from Leah Weil to Keith Weaver on May 20, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 103617.

²⁹ Email from Steven O'Dell to Mark Bradell on May 20, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 190640.

³⁰ Email from Sun Yong Hwang to Steven O'Dell on May 20, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 201014.

³¹Anna Silman, "Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg's Controversial Comedy 'The Interview' May Not be Released in Asia," *Salon.com*, December 11, 2014,

“An Act of War”

When, a month later, the controversy surrounding Pyongyang’s reaction to *The Interview* burst across the mass media, nobody in Sony’s higher echelons was laughing anymore. On June 11, the first trailer for *The Interview* was released. On June 20, Kim Myong-chol, executive director of the Centre for North Korea-US Peace and an unofficial spokesman for Kim Jong-un’s government, publically condemned *The Interview* as a sign of the “desperation of the U.S. government and American society.” Five days later, in a departure from previous criticisms of western films, Pyongyang promised a “merciless response” to *The Interview* and warned Washington that failure to stop the film being released would be considered an “act of war.” On July 10, North Korea formally filed a complaint about *The Interview* at the United Nations, charged the U.S. with “sponsoring terrorism” and reiterated its call for the film to be banned.³²

It is abundantly clear from the company’s leaked emails and other sources that Sony was not part of any grand conspiracy to provoke North Korean aggression over *The Interview* and thereby either engender free publicity for the film or weaken Pyongyang politically. Though, as we have seen, a few executives anticipated some sort of reaction from Pyongyang, all were taken aback by its rhetorical ferocity. Still, it is noteworthy just how quickly and easily some at Sony turned to political advisers when

www.salon.com/2014/12/11/seth_rogen_and_evan_goldbergs_controversial_comedy_the_interview_may_not_be_released_in_asia/.

³² Catherine Shoard, “Sony Hack: The Plot To Kill The Interview – A Timeline So Far,” *Guardian*, December 18, 2014, www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/18/sony-hack-the-interview-timeline.

the controversy erupted. Michael Lynton, who was both chairman and CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment and the CEO of Sony Entertainment Inc., stands out in this regard. As well as overseeing all of Sony's global entertainment businesses, Lynton held a number of influential positions pertaining to American foreign policy. He was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a body headquartered in New York that brings together government officials, business leaders and prominent members of the intelligence and foreign policy community to discuss international affairs. Lynton was also among an elite group of US media executives to be on the board of the RAND Corporation, which was based a few miles north of Hollywood in Santa Monica. RAND had outlived the Cold War and enjoyed a global reputation for providing politicians, officials, businesses and the media with up-to-date information about anything from the adolescent use of marijuana to the threats posed by cyber-crime and the group Islamic State. Its senior members include military officers, members of Congress and private sector leaders.³³

A couple of days before Kim Myong-chol's denunciation of *The Interview* on June 20, Lynton had sought advice about the film's political and diplomatic fallout from both

³³ Council on Foreign Relations roster, updated list November 2014, www.cfr.org/about/membership/roster.html?letter=L; RAND Corporation Board of Trustees, updated list July 2015, www.rand.org/about/organization/randtrustees.html; Alex Abella, *Soldiers of Fortune: The RAND Corporation and the Rise of the American Empire* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin, 2008). On Lynton chairing a panel at RAND in November 2012 called "How Hollywood Affects Global Policy," see www.rand.org/blog/2012/11/how-hollywood-affects-global-policy.html

RAND and the State Department. At this stage, Sony's concerns mainly focused on American and Japanese citizens incarcerated in North Korean prisons. Pyongyang had recently arrested a number of what appeared to be American tourists on espionage charges, while the Japanese government was currently carrying out delicate negotiations about the fate of several of its citizens that apparently had been kidnapped and held incommunicado over a number of years by the North Korean authorities.³⁴ No less a person than Kazuo Hirai, the president and CEO of Sony Corporation, told Lynton to think extremely carefully about how *The Interview* might jeopardize this situation, especially when it came to releasing the film in particular countries. Lynton did not need persuading on this matter and arranged to discuss it with the U.S. Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, James P. Zumwalt. "My nightmare?" Lynton emailed a colleague, "[T]hey execute one of the kidnap victims if any are still alive because they are so crazy."³⁵

³⁴ On the propaganda aspects of North Korea's reputation for kidnapping foreign nationals, including South Korean filmmakers and artists, see Brad Williams and Erik Mobrand, "Explaining Divergent Responses to the North Korean Abductions Issue in Japan and South Korea," *Journal of Asian Studies* Volume 69, No 2 (May 2010), 507-536 and Paul Fischer, *A Kim Jong-il Production: The Extraordinary True Story of a Kidnapped Filmmaker, His Star Actress, and a Young Dictator's Rise to Power* (New York: Flatiron, 2015).

³⁵ Email from Charles Sipkins to Shiro Kambe on July 3, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 121175; Email from Noriaki Sano to Stephen Basil-Jones on June 23, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 115070; Email from James Zumwalt to Michael Lynton on June 19, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 124388; Email from Michael Lynton to Nicole Seligman on June 19, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 135493.

Within hours of Kim Myong-chol's speech on June 20, Lynton also sent Kazuo Hirai details of the first of what would turn out to be several conversations through the summer of 2014 with RAND defense analyst Bruce Bennett.³⁶ One of RAND's chief experts on Korea, Bennett was a firm believer both in the power of information warfare and, given recent political ructions and military purges in North Korea, in the vulnerability of Kim Jong-un's regime.³⁷ Lynton asked Bennett whether the North Koreans might be serious about launching retribution against the US or Japan if *The Interview* was released. After watching a rough cut of the movie, Bennett told Lynton that there were parts of it that "ironically ... the North Koreans will love, but other parts they are going to really hate." Pyongyang would especially like seeing a depiction of the CIA trying to kill Kim Jong-un, Bennett calculated, because it would corroborate long-standing North Korean allegations of US malevolence.³⁸ Overall, however, Bennett argued that Pyongyang was probably bluffing, including when, on June 25, it claimed *The Interview* was "an act of war." Some months earlier, according to Bennett, Pyongyang had used the same phrase to describe a South Korean leaflet-by-balloon

³⁶ Email from Kazuo Hirai to Michael Lynton on June 20, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 129953; Email from Michael Lynton to Nicole Seligman on June 19, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 135493.

³⁷ For Bennett's views and publications relating to North Korea prior to *The Interview* affair see www.rand.org/pubs/authors/b/bennett_bruce.html. For those during the affair see, for example, www.newsweek.com/north-korean-regime-out-control-294364 and www.rand.org/blog/2014/12/did-north-korea-hack-sony-pictures-entertainment.html.

³⁸ Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on June 20, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 116595; Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on June 26, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 139029.

campaign directed against North Korea's leadership but had not followed through on its threats to destroy the balloon launching areas.³⁹

In view of what he called this "bluster," Bennett significantly went on to say that Sony should, in his opinion, push ahead with releasing *The Interview* as planned. He also advised leaving the movie's ending, which saw Kim Jong-un being slain by Dave Skylark and Aaron Rapport, as it was:

I have to admit that the only resolution I can see to the North Korean nuclear and other threats is for the North Korean regime to eventually go away. In fact, when I have briefed my book on "preparing for the possibility of a North Korean collapse" [published in Sept 2013], I have been clear that the assassination of Kim Jong-Un is the most likely path to a collapse of the North Korean government. Thus while toning down the ending may reduce the North Korean response, I believe that a story that talks about the removal of the Kim family regime and the creation of a new government by the North Korean people (well, at least the elites) will start some real thinking in South Korea and, I believe, in the North once the DVD leaks into the North (which it almost certainly will).

The irony is that by making such a big deal of the movie, North Korea will likely cause a significant expansion of the audience that sees it.⁴⁰

³⁹ Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on June 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 139029.

⁴⁰ Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on June 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 128396; Bruce W. Bennett, "Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse," RAND Corporation, www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR331.html.

Bruce Bennett was not the only one who saw *The Interview*'s potential for North Korean disruption. That same day, Lynton responded to Bennett, saying that he had spoken confidentially to "someone very senior" in the State Department, who entirely supported Bennett's assessment of the film. Encouragement also came from Josh Steiner, a senior executive at the financial services company Bloomberg L.P. and a fellow member of the Council on Foreign Relations. "Really interesting," Steiner told Lynton after reading Bennett's appraisal of *The Interview*. "And I love the fact that he also wanted to provide artistic advice."⁴¹ Months later, when *The Interview* hit the market, a number of South Korean activist groups (some linked to the government in Seoul, others not) immediately began air-dropping tens of thousands of copies of the film with Korean sub-titles on DVDs and USB memory sticks into North Korea via hydrogen balloons. Prominent among these was Fighters for a Free North Korea, an organization run by former North Korean government propagandist Park Sang Hak and assisted by the New York-based Human Rights Foundation. Hak and the HRF claimed to have air-dropped or smuggled dozens of Hollywood movies into North Korea in recent years, including *Zero Dark Thirty*, about the CIA's assassination of Osama bin Laden, and the anti-authoritarian *Hunger Games* series (2012-2015).⁴²

⁴¹ Email from Michael Lynton to Bruce Bennett, August 26, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 12874;

Email from Michael Lynton to Josh Steiner on June 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 140055.

⁴² Lizzie Dearden, "Park Sang-hak: The Man Trying to Liberate North Korea Using Balloons," *The Independent.com*, Dec 31, 2014, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/park-sanghak-the-man-trying-to-liberate-north-korea-using-balloons-9951706.html; Laurie Segall, "Activists Plan To Drop 'Interview' DVDs in North Korea," *CNN Money*, December 18, 2014, <http://money.cnn.com/2014/12/18/technology/north-korea-interview-drop->

As the row over *The Interview* continued to make international headlines in late June 2014, and Michael Lynton read reports of North Korean missile tests in the Sea of Japan,⁴³ Sony hastily constructed a four-pronged damage-limitation exercise. First, it modified the film's trailer, in an attempt to make it less politically offensive; for instance, it erased a clip that depicted Kim Jong-un's family.⁴⁴ Second, the company told Seth Rogen to stop making fun of the North Korean threats; "People don't usually wanna kill me for one of my movies until they've paid 12 bucks for it," Rogen had tweeted

sony/index.html; Paul Bond, "The Strange, Dangerous Sequel to *The Interview*," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 1, 2015, 32-34. For Asian and western press reports about the alleged demand for *The Interview* in North Korea and Kim Jong-un's efforts to keep the film out of the country, see, for example, Eugene Kim, "Demand For 'The Interview' Is Shooting Up in North Korea and Its Government Is Freaking Out," *Business Insider*, December 26, 2014, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/north-korean-demand-for-the-interview-2014-12?r=US&IR=T>; "The Interview In Demand Reports Dissident Radio Station," *Asia Radio Today*, December 30, 2014, www.asiaradiotoday.com/news/interview-demand-reports-dissident-radio-station; Emily Greenhouse, "North Korea Sets Up Task Force To Keep *The Interview* Out," *Bloomberg Politics*, December 31, 2014, www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2014-12-31/north-korea-sets-up-task-force-to-keep-the-interview-out?cmpid=yhoo.

⁴³ Email from Megan Klein to Michael Lynton on June 26, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 82074.

⁴⁴ Email from Dwight Caines to Michael Pavlic on June 27, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 25841.

⁴⁴ Email from Megan Klein to Michael Lynton et al on June 26, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 64940.

irreverently on June 25.⁴⁵ Third, Sony developed a list of “talking points” which the movie’s stars should stick to during their promotional interviews with the press. These points emphasized how the film was first and foremost a comedy; that *The Interview* was as much a skewering of the media and U.S. society as it was of North Korea;⁴⁶ that the film did not depict the real Kim Jong-un but a “hilarious movie character” based on the secretive leader; that the U.S. had a long and proud history of making comedies, like Stanley Kubrick’s 1960s nuclear satire *Dr. Strangelove*, which played with serious subjects; and that *The Interview* was not racist (“We’re calling out the absurdity of jingoism”). Finally, Sony tried to distance itself from *The Interview* as much as possible by asking its executives to stress that the movie was a Columbia Pictures release and that “our parent company has little to no involvement in the creative direction taken.” While this last statement would eventually prove untrue, Sony also arranged to remove its logo from merchandise related to *The Interview*. This was partly to protect the company’s name and its commercial interests in Asia, but also to reduce the damage *The Interview* might do to Japanese-Korean relations.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Email from Jean Guerin to Charles Sipkins on June 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 128861.

⁴⁶ Very few people seem to have interpreted *The Interview* in this way. On the film’s far sharper criticism of North Korea’s nuclear weapons strategy compared with the United States’, for instance, see Aynne Kokas, Chuck Tryon, Hugh Gusterson and Joshua Braun, “‘Freedom Edition’: Considering Sony Pictures and The Interview,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* Volume 60, No 4 (2016), 719-720.

⁴⁷ Email from Jean Guerin to Leah Weil on June 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 110482; Email from David Steinberg to Dina Wiggins on July 7, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 115130.

Sony's sensitivity to Asian diplomatic relations increased rather than decreased throughout the controversy over *The Interview*, further highlighting the complicated political situations in which international media conglomerates can sometimes find themselves. Nothing illustrates this better than the lengthy, and some might say bizarre, discussions about the shape of the movie's final scene, which has Kim Jong-un dying in a helicopter explosion. Emails exchanged between Seth Rogen, Sony CEO Kazuo Hirai and co-chairperson of Sony Pictures Entertainment, Amy Pascal, reveal that Hirai asked the filmmakers to tone down Kim's death scene drastically and to make sure that it never featured in the international version of the film. Rogen's team complied with the latter request and eventually agreed to make the scene "less gory", but only after repeated appeals by Pascal for, among other things, "a few less fleshy parts that spurt out of the fire ball." Rogen's team insisted on retaining Kim's head explosion because they believed, as Pascal informed Hirai, "this is what is necessary to make it play like a joke." Rogen emailed Sony executives several times during these exchanges to accuse them of "appeasement."⁴⁸

Amy Pascal, for one, was deeply troubled by *The Interview's* political and commercial complications and agonised over the best course of action. In her 25 years at Sony, she told Seth Rogen, she had "never gotten one note on anything [relating to a film] from our parent company." Moreover, she had never been in such a politically

⁴⁸ Email from Seth Rogen to Amy Pascal September 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 22450; Email from Kazuo Hirai to Amy Pascal on September 30, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 82863; Email from Ariya Watty to Amy Pascal on September 27, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 32301; Email from Seth Rogen to Amy Pascal August 14, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 28076.

sensitive situation involving a movie before. “I haven't the foggiest notion how to deal with Japanese politics as it relates to Korea,” Pascal fretted, “so all I can do is make sure that Sony won't be put in a bad situation and even that is subjective.”⁴⁹ Kazuo Hirai's apparently unprecedented involvement in *The Interview's* creative direction can partly be attributed to the regional controversy surrounding Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's recent announcement that his government intended to revise the country's pacifist constitution, and that Hirai feared the film would severely increase Korean-Japanese tensions.⁵⁰ Mark Schilling of the Tokyo-based English-language newspaper, *The Japan Times*, argued that Hirai's reported trepidation about *The Interview* was entirely reasonable given Japan's intimate familiarity with North Korea's “capacity for, not only buffoonish threats, but deadly serious criminal actions,” including the

⁴⁹ Email from Seth Rogen to Amy Pascal September 25, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 22450. In February 2015, Pascal claimed she had been “fired” as SPE co-chairperson. Many commentators attributed this to the publication of Pascal's “racially insensitive” emails about Barack Obama following the Sony hack. Michael Cieply, “Amy Pascal Says Sony Pushed her Out Of Studio Post,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/business/media/amy-pascal-says-sony-pushed-her-out.html?src=recg&_r=0 ; Christopher Rosen, “Scott Rudin and Amy Pascal Apologize After Racially Insensitive Emails About Obama Leak,” *The Huffington Post*, December 11, 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/11/scott-rudin-amy-pascal-apology_n_6310040.html.

⁵⁰ “Japan Cabinet Approves Landmark Military Change,” BBC News, July 1, 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-28086002

kidnapping of several Japanese citizens “many of whose fates still remain unknown.”⁵¹ US-based film critic Matt Goldberg agreed and imagined that Sony headquarters was saying to Rogen’s team that it was all well and good for those living in Hollywood to rile the North Koreans, because Pyongyang’s missiles did not reach US shores. “They can damn well reach Japan [however] so maybe you step a little gingerly when mocking the cruel, nuclear-armed dictatorship.”⁵²

While Sony came under these and other sorts of pressure to revise or even pull *The Interview* throughout the summer and into the autumn of 2014, RAND’s Bruce Bennett continued to stiffen Michael Lynton’s resolve to release the film. Bennett twice passed on messages from a friend, Robert King, who was the State Department’s special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, to the effect that Pyongyang was all bark and no bite. One of these messages illustrated how skillfully the U.S. government’s official broadcaster in the region, the Voice of America’s Korean service, was exploiting Pyongyang’s “PR campaign” against *The Interview*. The VOA eschewed overt criticism of the North Korean government in favor of a bland, objective statement of the facts, thereby making Pyongyang’s reaction to the film look ludicrous. Recent evidence suggested that the influence of foreign broadcasting like this was growing inside North Korean, despite strict censorship.⁵³

⁵¹ “What if The Interview had been Made in Japan?” January 1, 2015, www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/01/01/films/interview-made-japan/.

⁵² Goldberg, “Sony to Digitally Alter.”

⁵³ Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on August 18, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 124708; Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on July 17, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 128351;

Bennett also sent Lynton evidence of South Korea's increasing interest in *The Interview*, including its value as a propaganda weapon against Kim Jong-un. In mid-July, the RAND expert told Lynton that an unnamed member of the National Assembly in Seoul and the *Wall Street Journal's* Seoul bureau chief, Alastair Gale, whom Bennett knew personally, were particularly anxious to get preview copies of the film.⁵⁴ During the same period, Bennett furnished Lynton with a translated article about *The Interview* that had recently appeared on Radio Free Chosun, a South Korean shortwave radio station rumored to have been set up by the CIA that targeted North Korea in order to bring about regime change. The article poked fun at Pyongyang's over-the-top reaction to the movie and pointed out how it illustrated the North Korean regime's stifling of creativity. "Isn't Kim Jong Eun [sic], a portly form in a land of hunger, suitable material for comedic ridicule? If he doesn't like it, he should find a better way to go about things. Ordering salutes from the people and exuding arrogance in every photo further pushes viewers of the film to find commonalities between reality and fantasy." Bennett

Snyder, "North Korea," 104-105. King was a firm supporter of international efforts to break down the "information barrier" that the North Korean government had imposed on its own people, especially radio and film. "Foreign DVDs are now being seen [in North Korea] by even larger numbers," he told the U.S. Congress on July 30, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/07/20140730304663.html#axzz3k7cnIJMD>.

⁵⁴ Email from Bruce Bennett to Michael Lynton on July 17, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 90469.

obviously approved of this rhetoric, the power of which, he thought, would only increase once *The Interview* was released.⁵⁵

At the same time he was communicating with his RAND colleague during the crisis over *The Interview*, Michael Lynton was also in regular contact with Richard Stengel at the U.S. State Department. Stengel was a former managing editor of *Time* magazine, who in early 2014 had become Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. At Stengel's request in June 2014, Lynton drew up a list of senior Hollywood figures - including director Steven Spielberg, actor George Clooney and scriptwriter Aaron Sorkin - who he believed would be willing to help support U.S. public diplomacy efforts across the globe. In September, Stengel also asked Lynton for advice on how to develop a media strategy to combat the threat posed across the Middle East by the Islamic State (ISIL). Stengel specifically wanted to know who "the Muslim Bob Geldof" was, in order to develop a Muslim-led "We are the World" type video concert featuring both Muslim and/or hip-hop artists. Lynton replied by offering to talk with singer Cat Stevens' agent, David Wirtschafter, though Stengel made it clear that he did not want the concert to be seen in any way as a U.S. government-orchestrated event.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Email from Bruce Bennett on July 15, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 125349; Mi Ae Taylor and Mark E. Manyin, "Non-Governmental Organizations' Activities in North Korea," *Congressional Research Service*, 7-570, March 25, 2011, 11.

⁵⁶ Email from Richard Stengel to Michael Lynton on Sept 11, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 119224. On the US State Department's recent use of American Muslim rap artists, a strategy linked to its sponsoring of African American "jazz ambassadors" during the Cold War, see Hisham Aidi, "Hip-Hop Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2014,

In October, Stengel and Lynton met to discuss this matter further, as well as the State Department's wider need to counter "ISIL narratives in the Middle East and Russian narratives in central and eastern Europe." When prompted by Stengel to "convene a group of media executives" who could help in challenging the "skewed version of reality" of U.S. foreign policy that "millions" of people were getting, Lynton named 21st Century Fox's James Murdoch, Game Show Network's David Goldhill and Disney's Andy Bird, among others. Owing to a lack of evidence, it is impossible to know what, if anything, came of these conversations between Stengel and Lynton, but what is apparent is the Sony CEO's strong commitment to U.S. public diplomacy. It is difficult to believe this would not have had some bearing on Lynton's approach to *The Interview* controversy.⁵⁷

The emails exchanged between Lynton, Stengel and Bennett suggest that despite the fact that most U.S. government agencies have official entertainment offices that liaise with Hollywood, much of the state's ties to cultural production occur outside of these formal, semi-open channels. Indeed, one of the things that the Sony hack helps demonstrate is just how much of the work of "U.S. messaging" takes place through the private communications of highly placed individuals who have a good working

www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2014-04-16/hip-hop-diplomacy and Matthew Weaver, "US Agency Infiltrated Cuban Hip- Hop Scene To Spark Youth Unrest," *Guardian*, December 11, 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/cuban-hip-hop-scene-infiltrated-us-information-youth.

⁵⁷ Email from Richard Stengel to Michael Lynton on October 17, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 117082; Email from Lynton to Stengel on November 10, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 133736.

relationship and shared interests. These emails also reveal, however, that while government officials and entertainment executives often work closely to advance political agendas, both parties are wary of making that relationship transparent (as indicated by Stengel's insistence that his involvement in an anti-ISIL concert remain hidden). This is because, unlike in China for instance,⁵⁸ the concept of propaganda is so disdained in Western circles and because propaganda is often thought to be less effective when such relationships are made known. In other words, when a product is a known result of government or corporate influence, consumers are more apt to become skeptical of that product's content; political messaging suddenly looks like political messaging rather than just powerful (or in *The Interview's* case, comedic) entertainment, and thus its message is harder to swallow.

Additionally, when it becomes clear that a company or government is trying to manipulate or, in Sony's case, soften the political message of a film, cries of censorship soon follow – cries that any company would hope to avoid. This happened with *The Interview*, for when news leaked that Sony was tempering Kim Jong-un's death scene and making other concessions to mollify the North Korean government, many American media outlets expressed outrage. Tweets alone prompted Matthew Labov of Forefrontmedia.com to send Doug Belgrad, president of SPE's motion picture group, a summary of the social media chatter, most of which insinuated that Sony's editing of the film was an act of cowardice on the one hand and too similar to the moves of a

⁵⁸ In Chinese Communist Party usage, the word "propaganda" or *xuanchuan* is not negative. See Anne-Marie Brady, "China's Propaganda Machine," *Journal of Democracy* Volume 26, No 4 (October 2015), 51-59.

repressive dictator on the other. An email that Seth Rogen sent to Sony executives around the same time also outlined how stories about Sony censoring *The Interview* to pacify the North Korean government would likely hurt the film “critically and thus financially.” Titled “Hey Guys,” Rogen’s missive argued that

critics are very sensitive to censorship, studio interference, and creative vision. and that's the problem. no matter what i say, the fact of the matter is that someone in your studio leaked information that now makes [*The Interview*] seem like a compromised product. the head melting shot described vividly in all these articles is universally received as awesome by the articles writing about them, and when these critics see a shot that is decidedly LESS awesome, regardless of what story we put out there, the truth will be apparent: it's a compromised product...again, critics love nothing more than to wage a war on censorship, not to mention the obvious contradictory attitude of changing a movie to appease a government that movie is mocking for two hours. that just makes the movie seem dumb, which again, leads to bad reviews, less money, etc. ... this is now a story of Americans changing their movie to make North Koreans happy. That is a very damning story, and a very different one. whether you want to accept this or not, this has become a real issue that we fully believe will impact the finances of the film. ⁵⁹

Thus while Kim Jong-un’s death scene was a major red flag for Kazuo Hirai due to its potential impact on Japanese-Korean relations, Rogen’s email foreshadowed the ways

⁵⁹ Email from Rogen to Pascal on Aug 15, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 45250.

that the same scene would come to stand as an important symbol of artistic freedom in the West - a symbolism that would only intensify when major theater chains refused to show *The Interview* once a group of hackers threatened to attack any cinema playing the movie. In fact, what Rogen could not have known at the time he wrote his email to Sony was that, while Americans were indeed upset by the company's attempts to placate North Korea by modifying or deleting some of *The Interview's* content, it would be this group of shadowy hackers that would ultimately prove to be the main reason why *The Interview* performed so poorly at the box office.

The Sony hack

In late November 2014, the controversy surrounding *The Interview* entered a second, more intense phase. A couple of weeks before the film's scheduled premiere in mid-December, sources within Sony reported that the company had been hacked and blackmailed by a hitherto unknown group called the Guardians of Peace. The group subsequently used the infrastructure of Sony's PlayStation network to disseminate a large amount of confidential Sony Pictures' data. North Korea denied involvement in the hack, even after the Guardians of Peace issued a message, on December 9, demanding Sony pull *The Interview*. On December 16, the Guardians of Peace then warned audiences that cinemas screening *The Interview* could be subject to 9/11-style terrorist attacks. When stocks quickly fell in major cinema chains, Regal Entertainment, AMC Entertainment, Cinemark, Carmike Cinemas and Cineplex Entertainment – which together controlled about half of North American movie screens - refused to show the film. While the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced that the Guardians of Peace's message did not appear to be a credible threat, theater owners were nonetheless concerned that people would avoid any cinema showing *The Interview*, no

matter what movie they wanted to see, leading Sony to cancel the theatrical release of *The Interview*. In mid-December, Barack Obama criticised Sony for pulling the film, stating that it set a dangerous precedent. This led Sony to reverse course slightly by releasing *The Interview* in roughly 300 independent cinemas inside the U.S., along with theaters in select foreign markets, including Australia, New Zealand and the U.K. More significantly from a financial standpoint, Sony also arranged for a last-minute digital distribution deal with YouTube, Google Play, Xbox Video, and Sony's own site, SeeTheInterview.com, which helped Sony recoup a sizeable portion of *The Interview's* costs.⁶⁰ (Global box office sales only accounted for \$11.3 million of *The Interview's* return, while digital sales totalled roughly \$40 million during the first month of the film's release. Industry experts, however, still suspect that the movie lost money in light of its \$44 million production budget plus marketing outlays.)⁶¹

From Sony's perspective, the first phase of *The Interview* affair, from June to November 2014, had largely been about trying to balance commercial considerations

⁶⁰ Catherine Shoard, "Sony Hack: The Plot To Kill The Interview – A Timeline So Far," *Guardian*, December 18, 2014, www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/18/sony-hack-the-interview-timeline.

⁶¹ "The Interview' Headed To Netflix As VOD Sales Pass \$40M – Update," *Deadline.com*, Jan 5, 2015, <http://deadline.com/2015/01/the-interview-vod-sales-sony-1201353855/>; Gregory Wakeman, "Wait, Sony Lost How Much On The Interview?," *Cinemablend.com*, www.cinemablend.com/new/Wait-Sony-Lost-How-Much-Interview-69228.html; "The Interview," *BoxOfficeMojo.com*, www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=interview2014.htm

with diplomatic pressures. The company had trodden this line carefully but largely successfully: though it had felt a need to revise parts of *The Interview*, it had rarely wavered in its determination to release the movie, not least because popular sentiment overwhelmingly supported this, especially in the US, its chief market and working base. During the controversy's second, shorter phase in December, however, Sony found itself between a rock and a hard place. It came under increasing political and public pressure from those who, on the one hand, saw *The Interview* as one of the most important test cases for free speech in a generation and the film's detractors as "un-American," and others who, on the other, either blamed Sony for exploiting international tensions for profit or called for *The Interview* to be shelved altogether lest it trigger terrorist attacks in the U.S. and elsewhere.⁶²

What added to Sony's dilemma at the sharp end of the affair was the US government's open and heavily-publicized involvement in the debate about whether *The Interview* ought to be released. This was due, probably more than anything else, to Sony becoming the target of one of the largest and certainly most public corporate hacks in history. Barack Obama's administration interpreted the hack as technically

⁶² The international outcry over *The Interview* inspired others to release films about North Korea. For instance, Amnesty International, a long-time critic of the North Korean government's human rights' record, produced an online 15-minute documentary pointedly titled *The Other Interview*. This was a serious, first-person account of a North Korean woman who had apparently suffered at the hands of both the Chinese and North Korean regimes. The documentary is available at www.amnesty.org.uk/north-korea-other-interview.

short of an “act of war” but as a grievous violation of US sovereignty by North Korea. When that “cyber-vandalism” was followed by Sony’s decision in late December to pull *The Interview*, the National Security Agency believed that a “red line” had been crossed. The very next day, alarmed by Sony’s “surrender,” Obama convened his top officials in the White House Situation Room and, based on their unanimous recommendation, decided to take an action that the US had never dared before in response to a cyber-attack by another nation: name the government responsible and punish it by, among other things, threatening to put North Korea back on the state terror list, imposing financial sanctions on the country, and, unofficially, shutting down North Korea’s internet access.⁶³

In these circumstances, when *The Interview* enjoyed a limited release on Christmas Day 2014, it was perhaps to be expected that US public opinion would unite in celebrating the movie as a blow against totalitarian censorship and a victory for American values. Sony itself played it this way publically, as did acquaintances of

⁶³ Ellen Nakashima, “Why the Sony Hack Drew an Unprecedented U.S. Response Against North Korea,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/why-the-sony-hack-drew-an-unprecedented-us-response-against-north-korea/2015/01/14/679185d4-9a63-11e4-96cc-e858eba91ced_story.html. The U.S. government’s claim that North Korea orchestrated the Sony hack was challenged by a number of reputable, independent security firms and analysts. Bruce Schneier, “Did North Korea Really Attack Sony?” *Atlantic*, December 22, 2014, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/12/did-north-korea-really-attack-sony/383973/

Michael Lynton like the aforementioned Aaron Sorkin. In independent cinemas across the US people turned up to watch *The Interview* decked out in the Stars and Stripes. One theater manager even introduced *The Interview* by reciting America's old national anthem, "My Country 'Tis of Thee," while A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* described watching the film online in his mother's living room as "an act of patriotism ... in defiance of a dictator." Further blending nationalism with the cultures of media consumption, Sony announced it would release a special "Freedom Edition" of *The Interview* on DVD in February 2015.⁶⁴

But while *The Interview* was largely hailed as a victory for democratic values, it is clear that opinions about the film's artistic and political merits varied widely. Depending on viewers' aesthetic and political tastes, *The Interview* was read as everything from a worthless low-grade gross-out to a politically irresponsible insult and from to a savage piece of satire to the very embodiment of America's free spirit. For instance, many critics who addressed the film's content commented on its annoying use of adolescent jesting. Robbie Collin of the British newspaper *The Telegraph* wrote that

⁶⁴ Scott Bomboy, "The Different First Amendments Arguments about 'The Interview'," *Yahoo! News*, December 24, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/different-first-amendment-arguments-interview-154408483.html>; Paul Vallely, "The Sony Hack and The Ethics of Free Speech," *The Independent* (UK), December 28, 2014, www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/theres-a-time-to-speak-and-a-time-to-keep-quiet-9946581.html; Scott, "On, Then Off, Now On Again," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/12/26/movies/the-interview-with-james-franco-and-seth-rogen.html."

the movie was little more than “two hours of sex jokes and toilet humor” that must have made Sony’s executives wonder if the film was worth all of the political and financial hassle it had caused.⁶⁵ Despite his “act of patriotism”, *The New York Times*’ A.O. Scott was equally scathing, writing that the film was “pretty much what everyone thought it would be before all the trouble started: a goofy, strenuously naughty, hit-and-miss farce.”⁶⁶ More significantly perhaps, a number of other critics thought that *The Interview*’s premise and plot were wholly unbelievable, especially the parts involving the CIA.⁶⁷

By contrast, some critics praised *The Interview* highly. Echoing one of Sony’s damage-limitation “talking points,” the U.S. weekday television entertainment news program, *Access Hollywood*, thought *The Interview* was the best political satire since *Dr. Strangelove*.⁶⁸ Famed U.S. film critic David Edelstein reckoned *The Interview* was a “savage” political parody because even though the humor was infantile, Rogen and Goldberg had thoroughly emasculated Kim Jong-un. This “is about the most punk thing you can do to a repressive, totalitarian, murderous, self-proclaimed god of a closed but increasingly porous state,” maintained Edelstein. The film’s depiction of Jong-un as a man-child, who cries and soils himself on TV when confronted about his daddy issues,

⁶⁵ “The Interview, Review: ‘Farting Truth to Power,’” *The Telegraph*, February 5, 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturereviews/11392263/The-Interview-review.html.

⁶⁶ Scott, *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Patrick Carone in *Scout*, in Email from Ileen Reich to Dwight Caines et al on October 23, 2014. *Ibid.*, Email ID: 47903.

⁶⁸ Email from Ileen Reich to Dwight Caines et al on October 23, 2014. *Ibid.*, Email ID: 47903.

would be an “execution-worthy crime” in North Korea, and precisely because the North Koreans would never dare to satirize their own leader, *The Interview*’s use of “tasteless violence” against the Supreme Leader made the film “all the more righteous,” Edelstein decreed.⁶⁹

Other critics praised the way *The Interview* handled Kim’s removal from power, which they saw as offering up a comedic dramatization of an important political issue, namely, when it is legitimate to assassinate a foreign head of state. Richard Brody of *New Yorker* magazine credited the filmmakers for setting that bar very high by implying such an act was only justifiable when an attack on the US was “verifiably imminent” – a message that retroactively opposed the philosophy that had guided the US into the Iraq War and its removal of Saddam Hussein from power. The pair is not asserting a type of pacifism, he wrote, but is affirming “a policy of prudent and patient but ready and robust defense.”⁷⁰

Other reviewers would have none of this. Andre Seewood of Indiewire wrote that making *The Interview* was both politically and morally irresponsible as it “directly insults” a foreign head of state that has “tumultuous relations with the United States.” Seewood argued that satire which alluded to but still disguised the identity of its film subject, however thinly, was an acceptable cinematic practice, but that clearly

⁶⁹ “*The Interview* Is a Truly Savage Work of Satire,” *Vulture.com*, December 26, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/12/movie-review-the-interview.html>.

⁷⁰ Richard Brody, “How The Interview Handled the Assassination of Kim Jong-un,” *New Yorker*, Dec 18, 2014, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/interview-handles-assassination-kim-jong-un.

identifying one's target by name "turns a joke into an insult." Thus, in his opinion, Charlie Chaplin's satirizing of Adolf Hitler through the character Adenoid Hynkel in his World War II classic *The Great Dictator* – a movie Sony executives themselves compared with *The Interview* during production⁷¹ - was fine, but *The Interview's* going after Kim Jong-un by name was not. Other critics reasoned that Americans would be greatly offended if a hostile nation made a film about the assassination of Barack Obama, especially if that nation was one of the top exporters of commercial entertainment worldwide.⁷² The aforementioned Mark Schilling of *The Japan Times* also had misgivings about the film, especially as it related to Sony's decision to merely temper *The Interview's* death scene rather than pull the film entirely. Schilling argued that Kazuo Hirai had "pussyfooted when he should have stomped" given the dangerous line that Rogen and Pascal were about to cross. "Japanese-style tact, known as *enryo*, with its consideration for the feelings of even ignorant outlanders, can be wonderful," Schilling wrote, "but when you see someone about to douse a fire with gasoline, suggesting — ever so delicately — that they use a slightly smaller bucket may not be enough."⁷³

Regardless of these and other criticisms of *The Interview's* content, judging from media reports a clear majority of Americans believed that the movie's distribution after Sony had been hacked struck an important blow for western values. This sentiment was

⁷¹ Email from Doug Belgrad to Michael Lynton on June 18, 2014. Ibid., Email ID: 17894.

⁷² "Satire or Propaganda: 'The Interview' or Don't Yell Fire in a Crowded Political Theater," *Indiewire.com*, Dec 22, 2014, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/satire-or-propaganda-the-interview-or-dont-yell-fire-in-a-crowded-political-theater-20141222>.

⁷³ Ibid.

best represented by the A-list actor George Clooney, who maintained that Sony simply had to put *The Interview* online if the theaters were not going to show it: “We cannot be told we can’t see something [especially] by Kim Jong Un, of all fucking people.”⁷⁴ Even President Obama weighed in, calling Sony’s original decision to withhold the release of the film a “mistake” that violated American principles. Obama argued that overseas dictators could not be allowed to “intimidate us out of releasing a satirical movie. Imagine what they start doing once they see a documentary that they don't like or news reports that they don't like ... That's not who we are. That's not what America is about.”⁷⁵ Rogen and Goldberg wryly echoed this rhetoric on the DVD of *The Interview*. Before the main menu appears, the two tell viewers that if they are watching the movie, “they are goddamn, fucking American heroes,” and Rogen implores viewers to “enjoy their freedom” while watching the movie.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Mike Fleming, “Hollywood Cowardice: George Clooney Explains Why Sony Stood Alone In North Korean Cyberterror Attack,” *Deadline.com*, December 18, 2014, <http://deadline.com/2014/12/george-clooney-sony-hollywood-cowardice-north-korea-cyberattack-petition-1201329988/>.

⁷⁵ Evan Perez et al, “Obama: Sony Made a Mistake,” *CNN.com*, December 19, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/19/politics/fbi-north-korea-responsible-sony/>.

⁷⁶ *The Interview*. DVD, directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2015).

Conclusion

The propaganda war between Washington and Pyongyang has grown more vigorous and complex over the past decade, a result, among other things, of the growth of transnational media and of western filmic depictions of North Korean villainy. Most activity in this war passes under the average person's radar and often only makes international headlines when one or both of the governments want it to. *The Interview* is a perfect illustration of this, a Hollywood movie that most people would never even have heard of had Kim Jong-un not declared it tantamount to an American act of war in the summer of 2014. By the time *The Interview* affair ended six months later, the film had been at the center of one of the most serious episodes in US-North Korean relations for over 50 years. In the process, when looked at from an international perspective, Pyongyang had arguably suffered one of its worst propaganda setbacks to date. First, Pyongyang's early criticism of *The Interview* had underlined its reputation in the West for being "mad and bad," the very epitome of a "propaganda state." Then its retaliatory threats played into the hands of those Americans who claimed North Korea was part of a warmongering "axis of evil." Finally, Pyongyang's presumed links to the Sony hack and to the Guardians of Peace's warnings of another 9/11 allowed the western media to portray Kim Jong-un as a terrorist thwarted by America's faith in the freedom of speech.

Conversely, it can equally be argued that *The Interview* affair amounted to a propaganda coup for Kim Jong-un. Most of Pyongyang's propaganda is aimed at its own populace, to reiterate the government's argument that North Korea is at the center of world politics. *The Interview* affair made global headlines and placed Kim Jong-un at the center of the western news cycle. The affair also reinforced North Korea's nuclear threat

to the West, which many experts believe is exaggerated.⁷⁷ It can be contended that by flexing his political muscles over *The Interview*, Kim Jong-un may well have strengthened his position as North Korea's new leader. Certainly there is no evidence yet that reports about or DVD copies of *The Interview* have in any way destabilized his government.⁷⁸

Uncertain though we may be as to who gained the most from the propaganda battle over *The Interview*, the affair has certainly helped to clarify the American media's place within the wider conflict. Contrary to what some conspiracy theorists argue, the US government does not secretly control Hollywood, nor did it use *The Interview* as a catspaw against a new and naïve North Korean leader. It bears repeating that the hacked Sony emails prove that *The Interview* was neither financed nor inspired by an arm of the American government. Those emails and other sources do show, however, that elements of the "state-private network" that played such an important role in helping the United States win the Cold War against the Soviet Union back in the twentieth century, via such movies as Alfred L. Werker's McCarthyite *Walk East on Beacon*, still operate in the present day. One of these is the close relationship between

⁷⁷ Christina H. Kim and Juwon Kang, "Reworking the Frame: Analysis of Current Discourses on North Korea and a Case Study of North Korean Labour in Dandong, China," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* Volume 56, No 3 (December 2015), 393-394.

⁷⁸ The South Korean authorities have been known to block activists' air-dropping of DVD copies of *The Interview* during periods of increased tension with the North. See Dave Lee, "Balloons Take Tech War To North Korea," *BBC News*, May 29, 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-32921210.

semi-private think tanks like the RAND Corporation and senior Hollywood executives. Another is the Hollywood-State Department “network” that exists in relation to U.S. public diplomacy. Yet another is the discreet “consulting” roles played by current or retired CIA or State Department officials in Hollywood productions.

Together, these elements form the backbone of the Hollywood/Washington power nexus today, but pointing to the existence of this nexus is not to say that movies like *The Interview* are first and foremost political projects. As the Sony emails also tell us, Sony’s chief reason for making *The Interview* was to make money not propaganda. The company’s priorities then got extraordinarily complicated once Pyongyang turned *The Interview* from a movie into a politico-diplomatic cause-célèbre. Sony executives subsequently found themselves having to juggle multiple concerns about, say, Japanese-Korean relations with, among other things, complaints about cowardice from highly-paid Hollywood stars and accusations of censorships from the American media. In the end, then, *The Interview* reveals just how problematic it is to exercise soft power successfully through cinema in today’s transnational marketplace, where concerns about foreign relationships collide with box office sales.