

The Journalist Ambassador: Reporting from North Korea

Objective:

You will be able to...

- Debate the role and responsibilities of journalists in situations of crisis, in the face of strict barriers to information, and beyond.

Background:

Joseph Pulitzer said that the role of the journalist is to “illuminate dark places and, with a deep sense of responsibility, interpret these troubled times.” Few times and places require more illumination and interpretation than contemporary North Korea, a hermetically sealed country communicating with the outside world in the form of exaggeration, propaganda, and high-stakes threats.

Evan Osnos took up the task, embarking on a tour of Pyongyang and the demilitarized zone arranged by the North Korean government and interviewing a wide range of regime insiders. The result of his trip is a story that at once illuminates the situation and just how foggy outside perceptions of North Korea and the threat it poses remain.

In today’s lesson, we will explore the role and responsibilities of the journalist in situations of crisis, in the face of strict barriers to information, and beyond. We will draw on Osnos’ New Yorker story as well as interviews and a reflection from the field to gain further insights into his reporting process. Read “The Risk of Nuclear War with North Korea” carefully in full; skim the remaining resources and explore at least one in full.

Introducing the Reporting:

Resource 1: “Why Afghan Women Risk Death to Write Poetry”

Read Evan Osnos’s story from *The New Yorker*.

Write down your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Imagine yourself in Osnos’ situation, a couple of weeks out from your painstakingly planned trip to a foreign country with which the United States suddenly finds itself in an escalating crisis.
 - a. Make a list of pros and cons for going on the trip, both logistical and ethical.

- b. As the journalist, would you go? As the editor, would you authorize a journalist to go? Why or why not? Discuss with a partner or in small groups, then share with the class.
2. Take 5-10 minutes to scan your section and write down the name and job title of each person Osnos interviews and the purpose each serves within the story. Discuss as a class:
 - a. Do any of Osnos' inclusions surprise you? What can we learn about good journalistic practice from this list?
 - b. What voices are missing from this list? If you were writing a story about the North Korean nuclear threat, who else would you want to interview? Why do you think they do not appear in Osnos' story?
3. Osnos writes that reporting on North Korea is "less akin to normal foreign correspondence than to theatre criticism." Reflect:
 - a. What does Osnos do to be "an astute and careful observer" of that theater?
 - b. Can you think of other stories that, due to reporting conditions, you would characterize as theater criticism?
 - c. To what extent could you conceptualize all journalism as theater criticism?
4. Osnos acknowledges that he was perceived as a sort of ambassador of the U.S. by North Korean officials and civilians.
 - a. "The North Koreans had questions for me that I had to answer—about U.S. politics and the workings of the media and the mood of the public. They were a revealing window into the points of confusion or uncertainty in North Korean elite circles. Even some of the most informed members of the government are unsure what to trust and believe. As a visitor, I tried to give them honest, clear answers to their questions about American life—just as I would in any country. I felt that the stakes were a little higher in terms of helping to close some of the gaps in in their understanding."

Reflection:

Write down your answers to the following questions on the same sheet of paper.

1. How was Osnos' role as an ambassador on this trip similar to and different from the role any foreign correspondent plays?
2. What and to whom are the journalist's responsibilities when reporting from a country in a conflict with their home country?
3. Osnos is a scholar and specialist in East Asian affairs in addition to being a journalist. What are the advantages and disadvantages to journalists pursuing disciplinary and/or geographic specializations?
4. Osnos relates several moments in which North Korean officials ask him to interpret U.S. politics, media, and culture. What do you think of his responses? Would you have responded differently in any cases if you were there as a journalist? What about if you were there as a private citizen?

5. Consider the role(s) of the journalist, the stakes of the nuclear crisis, and the rarity of a glimpse into North Korea like the one Osnos obtained/provides. Discuss:
 - a. Who is the audience for this story?
 - b. Who are the audiences that most needs the information this story provides? Is it likely to reach them? If so, how? If not, can you imagine a way in which it could?
 - c. What do you think is the intended impact of this story? The actual impact?

Activity:

1. Individually, create a list of taboo subjects in your community.
2. Compare your list of taboos to the subjects of the landais read aloud in “Snake.” What similarities and differences do you see?
3. Choose one item from your list that is especially meaningful to you, and answer the following questions about it:
 - In what community is this subject taboo? (your family, your religious group, your town, the world over, etc.)
 - Why do you think this subject is taboo?
 - Who has established it as taboo?
 - Do you agree that people shouldn’t talk about this subject? Why or why not?
 - What would happen if you did talk openly about this subject?
4. Write a landai that expresses your opinion/feelings/experiences related to this subject. Be as direct and honest as you can be; your work will be shared with the class, but only anonymously. Be intentional in your use of language. Consider: How does this subject make you feel? How can you convey that feeling to your reader? When you are finished, fold your paper in half and give it to your teacher. (You can write more than one, time permitting.)

Extension Activity:

Option 1:

1. Write a story about the current U.S.-North Korean nuclear crisis, doing your field work in your community, or in another community in the United States. Think creatively about who you choose to interview. Your story should not be an investigative or breaking news piece, but should instead do what Osnos calls the “difficult and important” work of being “an astute and careful observer.”
2. After filing your stories, discuss as a class how the process of reporting this story from the U.S. is similar to and differs from Osnos' process of reporting from North Korea.

Option 2:

Osnos refers to deterrence as “political gamesmanship” and writes: “In 1966, [Thomas Schelling] envisaged a nuclear standoff as a pair of mountain climbers, tied together, fighting at the edge of a cliff. Each will move ever closer to the edge, so that the other begins to fear that he might slip and take both of them down. It is a matter of creating the right amount of fear without losing control. Schelling wrote, ‘However rational the adversaries, they may compete to appear the more irrational, impetuous, and stubborn.’”

He concludes, “Our grasp of North Korea’s beliefs and expectations is not much better than its grasp of ours. To go between Washington and Pyongyang at this nuclear moment is to be struck, most of all, by how little the two understand each other. In eighteen years of reporting, I’ve never felt as much uncertainty at the end of a project, a feeling that nobody—not the diplomats, the strategists, or the scholars who have devoted their lives to the subject—is able to describe with confidence how the other side thinks.”

A central theme of Osnos’ story is the mutual uncertainty about the sanity and recklessness of leaders in North Korea and the U.S. Greater shared knowledge, he seems to suggest, has the potential to reduce the threat of nuclear war.

1. Identify a conflict in your community or in the United States at large that you believe is exacerbated by lack of communication and/or misunderstanding.
2. Craft a pitch for a story covering this conflict, being sure to include:
 - The positions of the two sides
 - Your understanding of the barriers to communication and/or mutual understanding
 - How better communication/mutual understanding could improve conditions
 - A list of people to interview
 - Your target audience
 - How you would place/market your story to reach that audience
 - 3. Pitch your story to the class and get your classmates’ feedback.
4. Incorporate the feedback into your plan, then report and write the story.