

Virtual Suggestions: Google and North Korea

By Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos

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Despite the media attention paid to Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt during his visit to North Korea, make no mistake, Bill Richardson and Tony Namkung are the driving force behind the visit. Richardson has sojourned to North Korea half a dozen times and Namkung has visited at least 100 times. Eric Schmidt was likely the “juicy bait” to seal the deal with the North Koreans. Even a reclusive North Korea knows a great deal when they see one.

Assuredly DPRK leaders will enjoy chewing the cud with Schmidt about the state of the world’s knowledge economy. Equally obvious is that North Korea will publicly embrace Google and the open Internet, yet maintain or strengthen tight controls over the North Korean intranet.

However, Google isn’t just a search engine. It also has a huge program of activities that support its mission which are more realistic bases for cooperation with North Korea, including some that can be implemented quickly, relatively low cost, and have a high pay off in multiple areas, yet are not going to cause regime change – North Korea will immediately reject all those ideas. Let’s look at some of the “Google options” that might work in North Korea.

Practical renewables – North Korea has myriad energy problems. There is no quick solution for the overall situation, but energy efficiency and low cost renewables make for quick improvements until the rest of the infrastructure is refurbished. For energy efficiency, think container ships full of cheap insulation material. People can’t eat insulation so it’s unlikely to be diverted from the civilian to the military sector. And even if diverted, the less energy demands on the grid, the less carbon in the atmosphere, the less stripping of soil as people seek biofuels, and the more energy available for daily survival.

Solar thermal heating and passive design (think feng shui) reduce energy demand. Photovoltaics (PV) have rural, isolated high value communications uses such as cell phone charging. Wind turbines are an option in the few locations where the grid is large enough to operate them. (DISCLOSURE: Nautilus helped install wind turbines in North Korea in the past). In some areas the grid can’t support wind turbines, but windmills on farms and rural settlements can bring drinking water. Ultraviolet light water purification systems powered by PV can save lives and reduce demand for

scarce medical supplies by removing e-coli from drinking water polluted by sewage. In short, Google has a massive renewables program and much to talk about with North Koreans.

This, rather than some breakthrough between the Internet and the North Korean intranet is far more likely to be productive from a humanitarian and therefore (given sanctions) practical viewpoint if Google is to be involved.

Job Creation – North Korea has a large, under-utilized work force that they (and China for that matter) want to see gainfully employed. Almost any document intensive, data entry work can be done from North Korea. The labor force doesn’t have to move, they can work from where they are using satellite-based internet connectivity and call centers. Processing medical, insurance, banking, legal documents from South Korea could easily employ 100,000+ people, especially as they already speak Korean unlike any other offshore data entry site in India or the Caribbean. They are not going to start any kind of “spring” movements, but there will likely be some evolution of thought.

Unfortunately, North Korea has somewhere around 30 percent of a generation with stunted mental and physical growth from a decade of malnutrition. There are not many jobs for them right now, but data entry offers some hope for them. Perhaps Google could facilitate this virtual labor export from the North to South Korea.

Virtual Family Reunion – Google has a whole site devoted to reconnecting refugees with families used in emergency zones. This could be used for virtual family reunions in a highly controlled manner. Virtual family reunions will create a few jobs, but this project is humanitarian; monetizing family reunions is highly political. There are fewer and fewer Korean War era survivors. Laying eyes on one’s relatives and hearing their voice is better than a 60+ year distant memory and a promise that maybe one day there will be a chance to visit in person.

Guarded Optimism – It is wildly unrealistic to believe a 30 year old will experience an epiphany and abruptly alter gerontocratic institutions in North Korea. However, it is entirely possible to achieve simple, discrete activities that “do no harm” and also benefit the lives of the average North Korean. There are no technical barriers or magic bullets here, only mustering enough political will to stay out of the way. Maybe Google can help North Korea after all – just not via access to the Internet.

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