

Manuscript Overview

Autocratic Propaganda in a Globalized World

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The battle for citizens' minds has long preoccupied the world's autocrats. Joseph Goebbels, architect of Nazi Germany's propaganda apparatus, believed that "propaganda becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it."¹ This conviction permeated his work. Since broadcasting exclusively positive news would "fairly compel the German public to listen to foreign and enemy broadcasts," Goebbels instructed state media to report information that damaged the government. When crafting propaganda, Goebbels again insisted on truth: "otherwise the enemy or the facts might expose falsehoods." He routinely employed "black propaganda." If responding to enemy allegations in the state press might lend them credibility, Goebbels organized "word of mouth propaganda" campaigns waged by "faithful citizens, which were successful as long as the citizens targeted by these campaigns were unaware of them."²

If Goebbels is correct, then the modern world should be particularly inhospitable for autocratic propaganda. Two decades ago, less than 1% of the world's population enjoyed internet access; today, roughly 40% does. Each passing second registers more than 50,000 Google searches and 2.5m emails.³ The challenges that the Information Age poses to the world's autocrats are compounded by Western governments, who pressure autocrats to permit independent media. As a result, citizens around the world are cognizant of democratic norms and their governments' failures to abide them. Even in Africa, where internet access remains limited, citizens Google their democratic aspirations – with words like "democracy," "human rights," and "constitution" – more than anywhere else in the world.

How do autocrats employ propaganda in the Information Age? Our basic answer is that the world's autocrats cultivate the appearance of neutrality so that, during moments of crisis, they have some hope of manipulating their citizens' beliefs. This basic insights explains a range of otherwise puzzling behavior exhibited by autocratic propaganda apparatuses. We show, for instance,

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¹Quoted in Taylor (1998) and Cunningham (2002).

²For a distillation of Goebbels' 6,800 page diary into 19 core principles, see Doob (1950).

³These statistics are drawn from www.internetlivestats.com.

that the vast majority of autocratic propaganda newspapers provide strikingly neutral coverage of the regime for the vast majority of the calendar year, as do state-run newspapers in the world's democracies. The set of issues on which state-run newspapers focus is also remarkably similar to the set of issues on which their counterparts in the world's democracies focus: heavy on legitimate economic and foreign coverage, strikingly light on threats of repression. The exception to this general trend is on temporal windows that have traditionally been associated with collective action. For autocracies that organize regular elections, propaganda spikes immediately prior to election day. For autocracies that do not hold regular elections, propaganda spikes on sensitive holidays. We find evidence of learning: holidays associated with collective action in years past are associated with propaganda spikes in years hence. We find evidence of strategic interaction between autocratic propaganda newspapers and leading independent newspapers. We find systematic variation in baseline propaganda levels across autocracies. Using several identification strategies, we find also evidence that these propaganda strategies work: that propaganda reduces the rate of popular protest, and that the most profound effects are generated by sustained propaganda over time.

We draw on an original dataset of more than 100 state-run newspapers in five languages from across the world: in short, every state-run newspaper that we could identify and obtain. Our corpus encompasses nearly 100 countries and roughly 30 million unique articles. To create the dataset, we collected state-run newspapers by scraping their online archives using the Python programming language, or by downloading them from Lexis Nexis. We then used a series of computational techniques to create measures of propaganda for key political actors in a given country and categorize articles by substantive issue area. The result is a day-level dataset that records a range of information about coverage tone and topic across state-run newspapers in autocracies, their counterparts in democracies, and, in some cases, the independent newspapers that they partly strategize against.

Annotated Table of Contents

Part I. State-Run Newspapers: Variation and Explanation

Chapter 1. Beliefs and Information in a Globalized World

The manuscript's introductory chapter situates the project in the broader study of autocratic politics and the politics of belief.

Chapter 2. State-Run Newspapers Around the World

This chapter provides an overview of state-run newspapers around the world: which countries have them, how many they have, how these newspapers are distributed across print and online platforms. We establish baseline descriptive statistics and show that the volume of propaganda exhibits tremendous variation across regime type.

Chapter 3. Theory

This chapter develops a formal model of propaganda, which builds on recent work by ?, ?, and

Gehlbach, Svolik and Sonin (2016). We argue that propaganda generally serves two purposes: to shape citizens beliefs about regime performance, and to shape citizens beliefs about their neighbors' support for the regime. Though seemingly similar, these two purposes force propaganda apparatuses to employ legitimate news in different ways. In turn, this yields a series of predictions about the mix of legitimate news and pro-regime propaganda according to the role of elections, access to alternative information sources, and recourse to repression.

Part II. Focal Points and Propaganda Calendars

Part II focuses on temporal variation in propaganda *within* countries. Drawing on the theory in Chapter 3, we document a propaganda calendar, which is strikingly common across the world's autocracies. This calendar, we show, corresponds largely to the calendar of popular protest.

Chapter 4. Election Season Politics

The vast majority of the world's autocracies now abide nominally democratic institutions: term limits, national legislatures, and regular elections contested by a range of political parties. These regular elections, scholars increasingly find, constitute focal points for popular protests. By fostering tacit coordination, regular elections help citizens overcome the collective action problem. In autocracies that feature nominally democratic institutions, the electoral calendar drives the propaganda calendar. We show that propaganda in autocracies is generally neutral, save for the 15 days prior to an election, when positive coverage of the autocrat and the ruling party triples. This increase is driven not by more effusive articles, but an increase in the share of articles about the regime. Consequently, the aggregate volume of pro-regime coverage increases, but per article positive coverage does not. Save for this electoral period, state-run newspapers in autocracies are essentially *indistinguishable* from state-affiliated newspapers in democracies

Chapter 5. Anniversary Politics

Although the vast majority of the world's autocracies organize regular elections, its most populous autocracy – the People's Republic of China – does not. In autocracies where the protest calendar is driven by national holidays, so too is the propaganda calendar. Of course, many countries have no shortage of national holidays. Accordingly, we look for evidence of *learning*: Does the Chinese propaganda apparatus calibrate propaganda around a given holiday i in year t based on the volume of protest on that same holiday i in years past. We find that it does.

Part III. Propaganda Strategies and Cross-Country Variation

Part II focuses on variation in baseline propaganda rates across countries. In particular, we explore whether these baseline rates are driven by regime type and the prevailing information landscape.

Chapter 6. Explaining Baseline Propaganda Rates

Chapter 5 showed that, outside election seasons, state-run newspapers in autocracies are generally

indistinguishable from state-affiliated newspapers in democracies. In this chapter we document substantial variation in baseline propaganda rates. Consistent with the theory in Chapter 3, we show that this variation is associated with both regime type and the availability of alternative sources of information. This is consistent, we argue, with a model of propaganda in which coverage is constrained by the regime’s ability to control the underlying media environment.

Chapter 7. The Relationship Between Independent and State-Run Newspapers

Chapter 7 builds on Chapter 6 by exploring how state-run newspapers in autocracies strategize against independent newspapers. To attend to strategic dynamics, we focus on a single country: the Republic of Congo, where *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville* has served as President Denis Sassou Nguesso’s chief propaganda outlet for a decade. Congo’s oldest independent newspaper, *La Semaine Africaine*, has been subject to increasing levels of self-censorship since Sassou Nguesso seized power in 1997. We show that as self-censorship at *La Semaine Africaine* has increased, so too has the baseline propaganda rate in *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*. We show too that, although *La Semaine Africaine* is published just twice weekly, its coverage agenda Granger causes the agenda in *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*.

Part IV. Does Propaganda Work

We conclude in Part IV by asking the critical question: Does propaganda work?

Chapter 8. Propaganda and Protest in Africa’s Autocracies

Does pro-regime propaganda diminish the rate of protest in the world’s autocrats? To answer this question, we focus on the African continent, where day-level records of protest are remarkably good. Since propaganda is strategic, autocrats who employ it may be systematically different than those who do not, and in ways that are correlated with protest. Accordingly, we probe how *changes* in the volume of propaganda over time affect changes in the daily probability of protest. We find that propaganda has indeed diminished the probability of protest, and that its effects persist over time. By increasing the level of pro-regime propaganda by one standard deviation, autocrats have reduced the probability of protest the following day by 8%. The half-life of this effect is between 4 and 12 days, and between 10% and 20% of the initial effect persists after one month. This temporal persistence is remarkably consistent with campaign advertisements in democracies.

Chapter 9. Propaganda and Protest in China

Chapter 8 accommodates autocrat-level selection bias by focusing on how changes in propaganda condition changes in the rate of protest. It is possible, however, that propaganda and protest – within countries – could be related through some unobserved temporal factor. To be clear, we expect this *temporal* selection to render less likely the findings in Chapter 8. Still, in this chapter we exploit the size and ethnic fragmentation of the People’s Republic of China, a country of 1.4 billion people, to obtain a measure of propaganda that is “as if random.” In particular, we exploit the fact

that Chinese propaganda is set at the national level, but must respond to political conditions at the local level. This political conditions are often extremely different across communities: Holidays that are politically sensitive in some ethnic communities are virtually unknown in others, yet all citizens are simultaneously exposed to the same propaganda. Again, we find that Chinese propaganda has diminished the rate of protest.

Chapter 10. Conclusion

The manuscript's conclusion proposes a range of topics for future research.

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