

# Comparative Politics Newsletter

The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association

Editors: Matt Golder ([mgolder@psu.edu](mailto:mgolder@psu.edu)), Sona N. Golder ([sgolder@psu.edu](mailto:sgolder@psu.edu))

Editorial Assistant: Charles Crabtree, Jinhyuk Jang

Editorial Board: Molly Ariotti, Xun Cao, Elizabeth C. Carlson, Yaoyao Dai, Kostanca Dhima, Boyoon Lee, Vineeta Yadav, Joseph Wright

## Contents

Letter from the Editors by Matt Golder and Sona N. Golder .....	1
I. Symposium: Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation	
Explaining the Spread of Misinformation on Social Media: Evidence from the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election by Pablo Barberá .....	7
Propaganda and Electoral Constraints in Autocracies by Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter .....	11
Strategic Campaign Sentiment by Charles Crabtree, Matt Golder, Thomas Gschwend, and Indriði H. Indriðason .....	18
Foreign Native Advertising by Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Rose Luqiu .....	25
The Relationship between State and Corporate Censorship by Anita R. Gohdes .....	31
Informational and Non-Informational Propaganda by Carlo M. Horz .....	38
Media Freedom Decline in Democracies: Lessons from Latin America by Marisa Kellam .....	44
Fake News, Propaganda, and Lies Can Be Pervasive Even If They Aren't Persuasive by Andrew T. Little .....	49
Why Do Governments Censor? Expanding from State Survival to Content Regulation Theories in Political Science by Stephen Meserve .....	55
How to Measure Information Manipulation? by Arturas Rozenas and Denis Stukal .....	59
Conspiracy Theories: An Agenda for Comparative Political Science by Joseph Uscinski .....	66
Dearth and Distortion in Dictators' Data by Jeremy Wallace .....	70
II. Dataset	
Categorizing Media Freedom from 1948-2016: Version 3 of the Global Media Freedom Dataset by Jenifer Whitten-Woodring .....	74
III. Other News	
APSA Comparative Politics Section Prize Winners 2018 .....	78
A Letter and Comment from the President of APSA's Comparative Politics Section by Cathie Jo Martin .....	81
Contributors .....	84

## Letter from the Editors

by [Matt Golder & Sona N. Golder](#)

The Pennsylvania State University

Welcome to the Fall 2018 issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*. Our current issue includes a symposium on Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation. As many of you know, this is our last issue of the newsletter before we hand it over to the new editorial team led by [Evgeny Finkel](#) at [Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies \(SAIS\)](#). Before describing our latest issue, we thought we'd take a moment to provide some descriptive information regarding the last four years of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*.

### *I. Four Years of the CP Newsletter: An Overview*

Over the last four years, we have published eight issues (Spring/Fall) of the *CP Newsletter*. We have tried to use our editorial position to address the topics we think are important in the comparative politics subfield, to build bridges across different scholarly communities, and, in particular, to highlight the research of young up-and-coming scholars. Among other things, our issues of the *CP Newsletter* have addressed:

- [Fake news and the politics of misinformation](#) (Fall 2018).
- [The comparative politics of policing](#) (Spring 2018).
- [Race and ethnic politics in comparative perspective](#) (Fall 2017).
- [Women/gender and comparative politics](#) (Spring 2017).
- [Populism in comparative perspective](#) (Fall 2016).
- [Data access and research transparency](#) (Spring 2016).
- [Training the next generation of comparative politics scholars](#) (Fall 2015).
- [Studying sensitive political phenomena](#) (Spring 2015).

In total, we have published 127 essays from 167 authors. In [Table 1](#), we provide some descriptive information about our contributors. Where possible, we have tried to place our numbers in context by providing information regarding the demographics associated with (i) full-time political science faculty teaching at universities and colleges in the United States, (ii) the membership of all organized sections in the American Political Science Association (APSA), and (iii) the

membership of APSA's Comparative Politics Section. Our data on full-time political science faculty in the United States comes from the *2011 APSA Task Force Report*, "Political Science in the 21st Century" ([American Political Science Association, 2011](#)). As such, these data are slightly out of date, and probably underestimate the current presence of women and minorities in the discipline. Data on the demographic characteristics associated with the memberships of APSA's various sections and its Comparative Politics Section come from [APSA's Organized Section Dashboard](#) and refer to information as of August 2018.

In terms of gender, 47.3% of our contributors have been women and 52.7% have been men. Although not perfectly equal, our percentage of female contributors is significantly higher than the percentage of female political science faculty members in the United States and the average percentage of female members across all of APSA's various sections. It is also slightly higher than the percentage of female members in APSA's Comparative Politics Section. In this sense, women are over-represented as contributors to the *CP Newsletter* relative to their presence in the discipline.

In terms of race, 23.4% of our contributors have been non-white and 76.6% have been white. Our percentage of non-white contributors is more than twice the percentage of non-white faculty teaching at U.S. universities and colleges, and about the same as the average percentage of non-white members across APSA's various organized sections. It is, however, lower than the percentage of non-white members in APSA's Comparative Politics Section.

We do not have data on the socioeconomic diversity of our contributors. Nor is there good data on the socioeconomic background of political scientists in the profession more generally. APSA's [Committee on the Status of First Generation Scholars in the Profession](#) was only approved in September 2015, much later than most of APSA's other 'status committees'. Responses from a survey conducted at the 2016 APSA Annual Meeting indicate that about 18% of attendees were first-generation scholars in the sense that they were the first members in their family to earn a four-year degree. Put differently, 82% of the responses came from people who had at least one parent with a college degree. This compares to U.S. census data from 2015 indicating that only 32.5% of

---

<sup>1</sup>This significant overrepresentation of individuals from the upper classes in political science, at least in terms of education, is nothing

Table 1: Diversity among the Contributors to the *CP Newsletter*, 2015-2018

	<i>CP Newsletter</i>	Political Science Faculty	APSA Sections	APSA CP Section
<i>Gender</i>				
Women	47.3% (79)	28.6%	37.8%	42.7%
Men	52.7% (88)	71.4%	62.2%	57.3%
<i>Race</i>				
Non-White	23.4% (39)	11.1%	24.2%	30.8%
White	76.6% (129)	88.9%	75.8%	69.2%
<i>Class</i>				
First Generation	-	-	18%*	-
Non-first Generation	-	-	82%	-
<i>Location</i>				
Foreign-Based	30.5% (51)	-	19.1%	-
U.S.-Based	69.5% (117)	-	80.9%	-
<i>Rank</i>				
Graduate Student/Post-Doc	19.8% (33)	-	-	-
Assistant Professor	21.6% (36)	-	-	-
Associate Professor	22.8% (38)	-	-	-
Full Professor	31.7% (53)	-	-	-
Other	4.2% (7)	-	-	-

*Note:* Data for the *CP Newsletter* refer to the 167 people who have contributed essays from 2015 through 2018. The numbers in parentheses indicate the actual number of contributors. Data on 'Political Science Faculty' refer to 2010 and come from the 2011 *APSA Task Force Report*, "Political Science in the 21st Century" (*American Political Science Association*, 2011). Unless otherwise stated, the data on 'APSA Sections' and 'APSA CP Section' refer to August 2018 and come from *APSA's Organized Section Dashboard*. "\*" indicates that the numbers are based on responses to a survey conducted at the 2016 APSA Annual Meeting and refer to individuals who are the first in their family to earn a four year degree (*Mealy*, 2018).

the U.S. population over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or more education (*Ryan and Bauman*, 2016).<sup>1</sup> One potential explanation for the particularly low level of socioeconomic or class diversity in the profession reflects its low level of 'observability' compared to gender and race. While we do not have data on the socioeconomic diversity of our contributors, one of us and two of our three editorial assistants over the past four years are first generation scholars and the first members of their family to go to college or university.

During our tenure, we have felt that it is important to get contributions from scholars both inside and outside of the United States. As Table 1 indicates, 30.5% of our contributors are based at institutions outside of the United States and 69.5% of them are based at institutions within the United States. Our percentage of

contributors associated with foreign universities is considerably higher than the percentage of APSA members associated with foreign institutions (19.1%). We have also tried to highlight the research of young up-and-coming scholars. Over 40% of our contributors have been graduate students, post-docs, or assistant professors. Full professors still represent our single largest group of contributors at 31.7%, although half of them were writing on some aspect of the profession rather than some research-specific topic.

## II. The New Editorial Team

We are pleased to announce that the new editorial team for the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* will be based at *Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)*.

compared to their overrepresentation among our elected officials. While workers make up about 52% of our citizenry, they account for less than 3% of the typical state legislature and an even lower percentage of our representatives in Congress (*Carnes*, 2018). While women's representation in state legislatures (about 25% in 2018) and Congress (about 20% in 2018) remains low, it has steadily been increasing since the 1970s. This has not been the case for working class representatives, where the numbers have not increased, and in the case of state legislatures have actually decreased, since the 1970s. In sum, socioeconomic diversity in politics and political science remains incredibly low, much lower than either gender or race diversity, both of which have been growing (slowly) over time (*Bump*, 2018).

**Lead editor:**

- [Evgeny Finkel](#), Associate Professor of International Affairs.

**Co-editor:**

- [Adria Lawrence](#), Aronson Associate Professor of International Studies and Political Science.
- [Andrew Mertha](#), George and Sadie Hyman Professor of China Studies.

**Editorial board:**

- [Lisel Hintz](#), Assistant Professor of International Relations and European Studies.
- [Sarah Parkinson](#), Aronson Assistant Professor of International Studies and Political Science.
- [Pavithra Suryanarayan](#), Assistant Professor of International Political Economy.

We thank [Karen Jusko](#) (Stanford University) and [Kimuli Kasara](#) (Columbia University) for leading the search for the new editorial team.

### *III. Symposium on Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation*

Our last issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* includes a symposium on fake news and the politics of misinformation. We have thirteen contributions that provide interesting theoretical and empirical insights into various aspects of the information environment in both authoritarian and democratic regimes.

**Conventional wisdom may be wrong.** A number of our contributions challenge various aspects of conventional wisdom as it relates to fake news and misinformation. In his essay, [Pablo Barberá](#) examines the empirical evidence regarding the prevalence of misinformation on social media in the United States. Among other things, he finds that old people and registered Republicans are significantly more likely to share links to false news stories than other groups. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Pablo points out that there is little evidence for the existence of ‘echo chambers’ on social media or the belief that social networking sites exacerbate political polarization. He goes on to argue that it is, perhaps, precisely because of the absence of echo chambers and the cross-cutting nature of online interactions that false news stories spread so quickly across the Internet.

[Andrew Little](#) suggests that we should not be too

concerned about the increasing level of fake news and misinformation in the current political environment. Drawing on insights from theoretical models of communication, Andrew argues (1) that persuasion is hard, particularly when individuals are already polarized, (2) that there are good reasons to doubt that people actually believe the fake news stories and lies they are being fed, despite what they say, and (3) that the goal of political misinformation is probably not persuasion.

[Joseph Uscinski](#) looks at conspiracy theories. He provides a number of recommendations for scholars interested in conducting research on conspiracy theories and conspiracy thinking. Similar to the claims made by Pablo Barberá and Andrew Little regarding fake news and political misinformation, Joseph argues that there is little evidence that the Internet has increased conspiracy theorizing. In addition to calling for more scholarship on conspiracy theories outside of Western democracies, Joseph also provides a warning to us that much of what we “read in the media about conspiracy theories may not have much evidence behind it, not unlike conspiracy theories themselves.”

**Conceptualizing, theorizing, and measuring propaganda.** We have several contributions that address propaganda from a conceptual, theoretical, or measurement angle. In his essay, [Carlo Horz](#) argues that game theory is a useful tool for analyzing the strategic nature of propaganda. He notes, though, that existing game-theoretic models of communication have tended to focus on ‘informational propaganda’ where actors are conveying false statements or lies. Carlo argues that we also need to start thinking theoretically about ‘non-informational propaganda’ in which information-free claims or rhetoric is used to change listeners’ beliefs and actions. In his contribution, he looks, in particular, at this form of propaganda as it relates to identity groups.

[Charles Crabtree](#), [Matt Golder](#), [Thomas Gschwend](#), and [Indriði H. Indriðason](#) also look at the information-free claims and rhetoric used by political actors, but in the context of election campaigns in European democracies. Rather than look at *what* parties say (campaign content) and *who* they say it about (campaign target), they look at *how* parties make the claims they do (campaign sentiment). Specifically, they look at how parties strategically use emotive language to frame the state of the world in either a positive or negative light, and thereby influence voter beliefs and behavior. Among

other things, they find that the strategic use of campaign sentiment is constrained by economic reality.

Erin Baggott Carter and Brett Carter argue that authoritarian regimes generally employ one of two forms of propaganda. One form of propaganda is aimed at persuasion and “damaging facts are occasionally conceded to persuade citizens of useful fictions.” Similar to the argument made by Charles Crabtree, Thomas Gschwend, Matt Golder, and Indriði Indriðason, the underlying idea is that citizens may stop believing the government if the information they provide is always good or departs too far from observable reality. The other form of propaganda is not aimed at persuasion but is, instead, designed to signal the repressive capacity of the state. As Erin and Brett note, this form of propaganda often derives its power from its “absurdity”, and its public consumption by large numbers of people makes sure that the repressive capacity of the state is common knowledge. Using quantitative text analysis methods to examine state-run newspapers in 68 countries, they find, among other things, that propaganda aimed at persuasion is much more likely in authoritarian regimes that face electoral constraints.

Arturas Rozenas and Denis Stukal take on the difficult task of coming up with a comparable way to measure information manipulation that can be used across multiple contexts. In doing so, they also present a typology of different information manipulation strategies, where *hard manipulation* involves censorship and distortion and *soft manipulation* involves distraction (signal-jamming) and selective attribution (framing). Arturas and Denis employ their measures of information manipulation to examine news reports on Russia state-controlled television. Among other things, they find that Russian television tends not to distort or hide ‘bad’ news stories, but puts a lot of effort into framing them so that the blame for the ‘bad’ news is directed away from the government.

In their contribution, Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Rose Luqiu examine a relatively new form of propaganda, *foreign native advertising*, in which foreign governments pay independent mainstream media in other countries to publish political advertisements that mimic the standard editorial content that appears on the hosting media sites. After discussing why independent mainstream media in a country would put their reputation at risk by deceptively publishing the political messages of a

foreign government, Yaoyao and Rose briefly summarize some of their results from an online survey experiment with real political advertisements placed in the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* by the Chinese government. Among other things, they report that respondents are often unable to distinguish political advertisements from standard news articles regardless of their level of education and media literacy. Their results challenge the view that citizens, especially those with higher education, are able to recognize government propaganda.

**Media freedom.** We have two contributions that address media freedom. Marisa Kellam looks at how and why media freedom declines in democratic countries, drawing on lessons from Latin America. As Marisa points out, political leaders may attack the media for many reasons, but the extent to which they are successful at doing this will depend on the willingness and ability of the legislative and judicial branches, as well as other ‘accountability actors’ in civil society, to check executive power. She goes on to discuss the implications of declines in media freedom for democratic backsliding.

In her contribution, Jenifer Whitten-Woodring provides information about Version 3 of the *Global Media Freedom Dataset (GMFD)*. The GMFD classifies the extent to which the media environment is free in each country-year from 1948 to 2016 for all countries. In addition to providing information on how global media freedom has changed over time and how it varies across regime type, Jenifer also explains how the GMFD differs from similar datasets such as the *Media Sustainability Index* and the *World Press Freedom Index*.

**Censorship.** Our final three essays address various aspects of censorship. The first, by Anita Gohdes, examines the relationship between state and corporate censorship. In it, Anita discusses how the increasing centralization of online content on particular websites poses problems for states that wish to censor certain kinds of material. In the past, it was relatively easy for governments to remove material they disliked from small and fringe websites. Now, though, they are often forced to shut down large and popular sites to remove the offending material, running the risk that this will provoke national outrage. To avoid this problem, governments are increasingly cooperating with large technology companies to remove the online content they



find problematic. In her essay, Anita goes on to investigate the interesting incentives that governments and technology companies face when interacting with each other by looking at the ‘removal requests’ made by governments to Twitter, as well as Twitter’s compliance with these removal requests.

Stephen Meserve also looks at patterns of government censorship in his essay. Much of the existing research on censorship has focused on authoritarian countries, where governments tend to use censorship as a strategy to strengthen their hold on power. As Stephen notes, though, governments in democracies can also engage in high levels of censorship. While some of this censorship is also targeted at consolidating power, Stephen argues that much of it is a more mundane form of content regulation that reflects relatively unobjectionable applications of domestic law in the area of things like hate speech and property rights. Among other things, Stephen suggests that it would be useful to start thinking about censorship in democracies “as a form of domestic content regulatory regime shaped by firm-politician interactions, akin to the literature on trade barriers.”

Our final contribution, by Jeremy Wallace, looks at the political sources and consequences of missing and distorted data in dictatorships, drawing on examples from China. He wonders whether authoritarian leaders, who are aware of the flaws in their formal information systems but who continue to censor information and prevent the emergence of a free press for fear of unleashing opposition forces that they cannot contain, are “doomed to rely on distorted data” and live with the inevitable policy mistakes that ensue. Jeremy suggests that informal networks of regime insiders can help mitigate some of these problems. Although these types of networks may produce splits in the regime during moments of crisis, they can improve the quality of the information emerging from formal channels as these insiders have less need to manipulate data in order to obtain promotions.

#### IV. Other News

In addition to our symposium, we have a couple of other news items. In [APSA Comparative Politics Section Prize Winners 2018](#), we list and congratulate those individuals who won the various prizes awarded by APSA’s Comparative Politics Section in 2018. The prizes in-

clude the *Luebbert Book Award*, the *Luebbert Article Award*, the *Sage Best Paper Award*, the *Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba Dataset Award*, and the *Powell Graduate Mentoring Award*. We also have a short [Letter and Comment](#) from Cathie Jo Martin, the President of APSA’s Comparative Politics Section. Cathie’s comment addresses what she calls the “cultural turn in political science.”

#### IV. Thank You

We want to finish by thanking some people who have contributed to the success of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* over the last four years. Our first thanks must go to our numerous contributors, without whom the *CP Newsletter* would not have had such interesting and thought-provoking content. We have been truly amazed at the high percentage of positive responses we have received when inviting people to contribute to the Newsletter and the low percentage of people who have, for various reasons, had to pull out at the last minute.

Our thanks also go to Susan Welch, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Pennsylvania State University, who provided financial and organizational support for the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*. Susan will be stepping down from her position as Dean this year after more than 27 years in the job and we thank her for her support.

A special thanks must also go to our three editorial assistants, Charles Crabtree, Yaoyao Dai, and Jinhyuk Jang, who have made our lives as editors, significantly easier. Charles, in particular, has been with us from the beginning, encouraging us to apply to become editors of the Newsletter, suggesting symposia for the different issues, guest editing the issue on [The Comparative Politics of Policing](#), running the Newsletter website, and much more.

We hope that you enjoy our last issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*. If you have ideas for possible symposia or special topics, or would like to publicize a dataset of broad appeal, please contact the new editor, Evgeny Finkel, at [efinkel4@jhu.edu](mailto:efinkel4@jhu.edu).

Matt and Sona

## References

- American Political Science Association. 2011. “[Political Science in the 21st Century](#).” *APSA Task Force Report*, October 2011.
- Bryan, Amanda C. and Eve M. Ringmuth. 2016. “Jeremiad or weapon of words? The power of emotive language in Supreme Court dissents.” *Journal of Law and Courts* 4(1):159–185.
- Bump, Philip. 2018. “[The new Congress is 80 percent white, 80 percent male and 92 percent Christian](#).” *The Washington Post*, January 5.
- Carnes, Nicholas. 2018. “[Working-class people are underrepresented in politics. The problem isn’t voters](#).” *Vox*, October 24.
- Corley, Pamela C. and Justin Wedeking. 2014. “The (Dis)advantage of certainty: The importance of certainty in language.” *Law & Society Review* 48(1):35–62.
- Mealy, Kimberly A. 2018. “[APSA diversity and inclusion report](#).” American Political Science Association.
- Owens, Ryan J. and Justin P. Wedeking. 2011. “Justices and legal clarity: Analyzing the complexity of US supreme court opinions.” *Law and Society Review* 45(4):1027–1061.
- Owens, Ryan J. and Justin P. Wedeking. 2012. “Predicting drift on politically insulated institutions: A study of ideological drift on the United States supreme court.” *Journal of Politics* 74(2):487–500.
- Ryan, Camille L. and Kurt Bauman. 2016. “[Educational attainment in the United States: 2015](#).” United States Census Bureau.
- Settle, Jaime E., Robert Bond, Lorenzo Coviello, Christopher J. Fariss, James Fowler, Jason Jones, Adam D. I. Kramer and Cameron Marlow. 2016. “From posting to voting: The effects of political competition on online political engagement.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 4(2):361–378.

---

## Symposium: Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation

### Explaining the Spread of Misinformation on Social Media: Evidence from the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

by [Pablo Barberá](#)

London School of Economics

Over the past few years, concerns about the negative societal consequences of the spread of misinformation have become widespread. While false news and propaganda are far from being a new phenomenon, the

emergence and popularization of social networking platforms appear to have increased the prevalence of false news stories and the speed at which they become viral. False rumors and news stories that were spread on social media have been mentioned as one of the reasons for the recent rise of populist candidates in the United States and Europe and as fuel inciting violence against ethnic minorities in countries such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar ([Taub and Fisher, 2018](#)). The same new technology tools that helped the pro-democracy groups during the Arab Spring to coordinate and start a revolution are now seemingly giving a platform to conspiracy theorists and extremist actors seeking to manipulate the political agenda for their own financial or political gain. However, we still know relatively little about the extent to which false news is propagated on social media or the extent to which it has a causal effect on individual attitudes and offline violence. In this short essay, I provide an overview of the existing empirical evidence regarding the prevalence of misinformation on social media sites and different individual- and contextual-level factors that may explain its diffusion.

#### *I. ‘Fake News’ on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Campaign*

The level of media attention paid to the role played by digital technologies in the spread of misinformation spiked after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Even before the election, journalists such as Craig Silverman ([2016](#)) at *Buzzfeed* were reporting that hyperpartisan and ‘fake news’ stories were being widely shared on social media and were reaching large numbers of citizens. These stories were being propagated, at least in part, by foreign actors, either for political or financial reasons.

A dataset that I collected over the same period corroborates this finding. Using the Twitter API, I obtained all of the links shared as part of a tweet that mentioned keywords related to the election (such as “hillary”, “clinton”, “donald”, “trump”, and so on) between October and November of 2016, representing a total of 24.1 million tweets. I then relied on a crowd-sourced list of domains that were producing mostly misinformation during this time — compiled by [Zimdars \(2016\)](#) and also used in other studies of misinformation — as a simple heuristic to classify the individual links shared on Twitter as being misinformation or not. The definition of misinformation used here — news stories that present political facts that are demonstrably false or

misleading — is deliberately conservative, meaning that my results likely underestimate the actual prevalence of misinformation. Each domain was manually checked to ensure that it met my definition of misinformation.

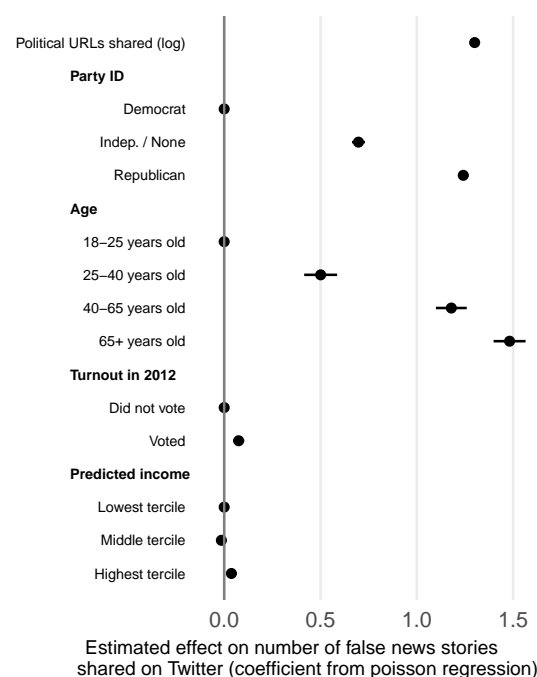
My analysis shows that links to domains that produced mostly misinformation were shared more often than all sixteen of the most popular media outlets, such as the *New York Times*, Fox News, NBC News, and the *Washington Post*, combined. More specifically, 16% of all the links shared during this period corresponded to fake news domains, while 13% corresponded to the sixteen established news outlets. The rest of the domains adding up to 100% included YouTube, Facebook, the official sites of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and WikiLeaks, among others. In other words, even under the most optimistic scenario, this analysis suggests that fake news stories were shared at rates comparable to news stories by mainstream media outlets. At least when it comes to Twitter, during the 2016 election there was as much misinformation being shared as actual news.

However, not every user shares misinformation at similar rates. I also found significant heterogeneity in the extent to which users were likely to propagate misinformation. My evidence here comes from merging my dataset with publicly available voter files in ten U.S.

states, which include information on users' party of registration, age, and voting history; the files were merged using the matching method introduced in Barberá et al. (2015). The results demonstrate that age and partisanship are the factors most likely to predict the spread of misinformation. Specifically, individuals over 65 years of age were nearly five times more likely to share false news stories on Twitter than those aged between 18 and 25. Registered Republicans were three times more likely to share false news stories than Democrats, although this particular result could be explained by the higher prevalence of anti-Clinton misinformation during this period. In contrast, differences based on past turnout or predicted income (estimated based on the value of the residential address where the voter is registered) were not as large.

To demonstrate that these patterns are not due to differences in the overall propensity of each of these groups to share political news, I estimated a poisson regression of the number of shared fake news links using a set of individual-level covariates, including the overall number of political links shared during this period. The results, shown in Figure 1, confirm that age and party ID have the largest impact on the number of shared fake news stories. These findings align with other recent work on misinformation. A 2017 report from the Pew Research center finds that 32% of U.S. adults say they

Figure 1: Individual-level Predictors of Misinformation Diffusion on Twitter ( $N = 31,651$ )





often see made-up political news online (Bialik and Matsa, 2017). A research article by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) finds that false news stories, particularly those favoring Trump, were also widely shared on Facebook ahead of the 2016 election. A paper published in *Science* and authored by Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) reveals that political stories that had been fact-checked as false had a broader and faster diffusion than those that were true, and that this result was not due to the automated propagation of rumors through bots. Finally, work by Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2018), who measure individual-level news consumption during the same period, finds that age and alignment between an individual's political leaning and the content being shared were positive predictors of exposure to misinformation.

## *II. How Cross-Cutting Interactions May Contribute to the Spread of Misinformation*

What explains the spread of misinformation on social media? The individual-level results described above suggest that low digital literacy among older people, as well as partisanship and motivated reasoning, may be two powerful mechanisms that explain the decision to share or click on a story that may be false. Of these, the second has received more attention because of its connection to a broader debate regarding how the Internet and social media facilitate the emergence of ideological echo chambers.

The prevailing narrative on this subject, put forward by authors such as Sunstein (2018) or Pariser (2011), is that online misinformation is being amplified in partisan communities of like-minded individuals. In these spaces, fake news goes unchallenged in part thanks to ranking algorithms that filter out any dissenting voices. This narrative has become so popular that even former President Barack Obama alluded to it in a recent interview with David Letterman:

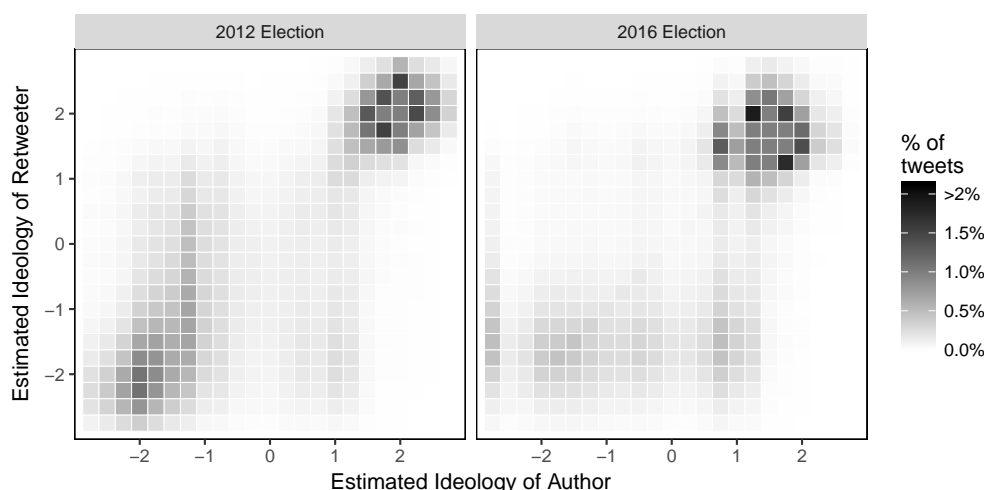
“If you are getting all your information off algorithms being sent through your phone and it's just reinforcing whatever biases you have, which is the pattern that develops, at a certain point, you just live in a bubble, and that's part of why our politics is so polarized right now” (Barack Obama, January 2018).

Despite this apparent consensus, though, the connection between online echo chambers and misinformation is not so straightforward. Empirical studies of news consumption in online settings consistently find that exposure to diverse news is higher on social media than in offline news settings (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018; Barnidge, 2017). Cross-cutting political exchanges on Facebook and Twitter are actually more frequent than commonly assumed (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015; Barberá et al., 2015). And the increase in polarization has been smallest in magnitude among those citizens who are most likely to use the Internet and social media (Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2017). In fact, some of my own past research shows that for most people social media actually has a depolarizing effect, at least when it comes to their overall ideological position (Barberá, 2015). In other words, compared to other types of news consumption, exposure to political information on social media leads to ideological moderation for most people. This seems to be because it increases the range of views to which people are exposed.

Compared to other types of news consumption, exposure to political information on social media leads to ideological moderation for most people. This seems to be because it increases the range of views to which people are exposed.

We might think that things changed after the 2016 election, an election considered by many as one of the most polarizing in recent U.S. history. However, a replication of my analysis of cross-ideological interactions on Twitter reveals a remarkable level of stability between 2012 and 2016 (Barberá et al., 2015). The heatmaps shown in Figure 2 display the structure of information diffusion via retweets of messages mentioning one of the candidates in the 2012 and 2016 elections. The horizontal axis indicates the ideology of the person who wrote the message and the vertical axis indicates the ideology of the person who spread the message. User ideology is estimated based on the political elites individuals choose to follow. In both elections, we find that a majority of interactions take place among people of similar political ideology, as indicated by the darker shade of the two poles along the 45-degree line. However, close to 20% of retweets are ‘cross-ideological’ in both 2012 and 2016, which suggests that even for such a political topic, most messages have the capacity to reach anyone on Twitter. This set of results reveals that the prevalence

Figure 2: Information Diffusion across Ideological Groups on Twitter in the United States



of ideological echo chambers on social media may be vastly overstated. Cross-cutting interactions are generally considered to be normatively desirable (Mutz, 2006). However, when it comes to the spread of misinformation, they may be having an unintended consequence. Precisely because social media increases unfiltered exposure to political opinions across the aisle, citizens are now increasingly exposed to all types of ideas — and that includes conspiracy theories, hyper-partisan stories, and illiberal political opinions. In other words, the mechanism that could be key to the spread of fake news on social media may not be the existence of echo chambers, but rather the opposite. To make sense of this apparent paradox, it is important to understand how social media transforms the patterns of interpersonal communication. Sites like Twitter and Facebook facilitate the maintenance of connections with both strong and weak ties. As defined by Granovetter (1977) in his classic study of social networks, strong ties are our closest friends and family, whereas weak ties are acquaintances, distant relatives, co-workers, and so on. The importance of weak ties is that because they're distant from us, they can connect us to new ideas and novel information. This is where social media represents a profound shift in our news consumption: they increase our exposure to information shared by weak ties. And because they are more ideologically diverse than strong ties, that will also increase the range of views to which we are exposed, including false news stories.

This argument highlights the tradeoffs that platforms face when potentially identifying solutions that can limit the diffusion of misinformation. Because false

news stories are often engaging and attract the attention of audiences that may not be as interested in politics otherwise, finding a way to reduce their spread may also reduce exposure to political news in general, leading to lower levels of political interest and civic engagement. In contrast, finding a way to increase exposure to 'the other side' on social media, as many scholars propose as a solution for political polarization, may have the unintended consequence of fueling the spread of misinformation.

## References

- Allcott, Hunt and Matthew Gentzkow. 2017. "Social media and fake news in the 2016 election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2):211–36.
- Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing and Lada A. Adamic. 2015. "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook." *Science* 348(6239):1130–1132.
- Barberá, Pablo. 2015. "How social media reduces mass political polarization: Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the US." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco.
- Barberá, Pablo, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker and Richard Bonneau. 2015. "Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber?" *Psychological Science* 26(10):1531–1542.
- Barnidge, Matthew. 2017. "Exposure to political disagreement in social media versus face-to-face and anonymous online settings." *Political Communication* 34(2):302–321.
- Bialik, Kristen and Katerina Eva Matsa. 2017. "Key trends in social and digital news media." *Pew Research Center*, October 4.
- Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro.

2017. "Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (40):10612–10617.
- Fletcher, Richard and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2018. "Are people incidentally exposed to news on social media? A comparative analysis." *New Media & Society* 20(7):2450–2468.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1977. The strength of weak ties. In *Social Networks: A Developing Paradigm*, ed. Samuel Leinhardt. Elsevier pp. 347–367.
- Guess, Andrew, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. 2018. "Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign." Unpublished manuscript, Princeton University.
- Mutz, Diana C. 2006. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pariser, Eli. 2011. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*. London: Penguin UK.
- Silverman, Craig. 2016. "This analysis shows how viral fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook." *BuzzFeed News*, November 16.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2018. *# Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Taub, Amanda and Max Fisher. 2018. "Where countries are tinderboxes and Facebook is a match." *New York Times*, April 21.
- Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral. 2018. "The spread of true and false news online." *Science* 359(6380):1146–1151.
- Zimdars, Melissa. 2016. "False, misleading, clickbait-y, and satirical 'News' Sources."

## Propaganda and Electoral Constraints in Autocracies

by Erin Baggott Carter

University of Southern California

and Brett L. Carter

University of Southern California

### I. Introduction

It is increasingly clear that propaganda works (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya, 2011; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014; Adena et al., 2015; Huang, 2015b). It is less clear, however, how

the world's autocrats determine their propaganda's *substance*. And, indeed, there is evidence of wide variation. Joseph Goebbels, the architect of Nazi Germany's propaganda apparatus, believed that "propaganda becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it" (Taylor, 1998). In crafting propaganda, therefore, he insisted on truth, "otherwise the enemy or the facts might expose falsehoods." Since broadcasting exclusively positive news would "fairly compel the German public to listen to foreign and enemy broadcasts", Goebbels instructed the state media to sometimes report information damaging to the government (Doob, 1950).

In this context, China's *People's Daily* is puzzling. In 2010, the Propaganda Department banned bad news from the front page (New York Times, 2010). Consequently, its content is absurdly positive. In 2017, the *People's Daily* claimed that President Xi Jinping's contributions to Chinese diplomacy had "transcended 300 years of Western theory on foreign affairs." The *People's Daily* does obvious violence to the truth, and so many citizens loathe it, as its vulgar sobriquets make clear.<sup>1</sup> Huang (2015b, 420) describes its purpose succinctly: "Such propaganda is not meant to 'brainwash' people ... about how good the government is, but rather to forewarn the society about how strong it is via the act of the propaganda itself." This is how students of totalitarianism have long understood propaganda (Arendt, 1951; Rorty, 1989; Wedeen, 1999; Levy, 2016).

Why do autocrats employ such different propaganda strategies?

### II. Our Answer

In our book manuscript, we argue that different autocrats employ propaganda for different purposes. Our theory builds on two insights in the existing literature. Levitsky and Way (2010) famously observed that some autocrats are more bound by electoral constraints than others. Put differently, some autocrats are more constrained in their ability to tilt the electoral playing field than others, perhaps because their recourse to repression is limited by international pressure (Aronow, Carnegie and Marinov, 2017) or because they confront domestic institutions or pressure groups that bind them. When autocrats are electorally constrained, they must seek some amount of popular support. These autocrats

<sup>1</sup>The newspaper is routinely called Riren Minbao, a phonetic play on Renmin Ribao, or "Raping People Daily." These are 人民日报 and 日人民报, respectively. See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/日人民报>.

employ propaganda to persuade citizens of the regime's merits. To be persuasive, however, propaganda apparatuses must be at least somewhat credible (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006; Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). To build credibility, in turn, propaganda apparatuses must sometimes concede regime failures. For example, they must report on things like economic crises or high levels of infant mortality. We refer to this as *honest propaganda*: damaging facts that are occasionally conceded to persuade citizens of useful fictions.

Propaganda in electorally constrained autocracies is roughly as pro-regime as Fox News is pro-Republican. In the most repressive dictatorships, by contrast, propaganda apparatuses are between five and ten times more pro-regime as Fox News is pro-Republican.

Where autocrats confront no electoral constraints — where autocrats can fully secure themselves with repression — propaganda serves not to persuade citizens but to intimidate them into submission. In this context, propaganda derives its power from its *absurdity*. By forcing citizens to consume content that everyone knows to be false — indeed, to be seen consuming it in their numbers — autocrats ensure that their capacity for repression is common knowledge.<sup>2</sup> This signal is costly. Autocrats who need some amount of popular support cannot afford to produce content that alienates citizens. This signal is also useful. It makes the capacity for violence common knowledge among citizens without actually having to use violence against them. Violence against citizens is always costly, even when it can be freely employed. The anniversaries of a regime's crimes against citizens constitute focal moments for collective action (Carter and Carter, 2018). Citizens are cognizant of these historical crimes, and cognizant that their neighbors are also cognizant of these historical crimes. By creating focal moments for protests, violence entails costs to the regime long into the future. Absurd propaganda — more precisely, the signal within — does not.

Put simply, the electoral constraints that an autocrat confronts determine the propaganda strategy that he employs. By forcing autocrats to curry some measure of popular support, electoral constraints force autocrats into a Bayesian propaganda strategy, requiring them to concede regime errors to persuade citizens of the regime's merits. When autocrats confront no electoral constraints, they employ absurd propaganda, which signals to citizens the repressive capacity of the state and creates common knowledge about the costs of protest.

This has important implications for how we understand nominally democratic institutions in autocracies. Scholars increasingly locate the origins of autocratic survival in nominally democratic institutions. These institutions, the arguments go, enable autocrats to credibly commit to revenue sharing agreements and policy compromises with elites (Magaloni, 2006; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2008; Wright, 2008). Scholars have suggested that elections enable autocrats to equitably distribute patronage (Lust-Okar, 2006; Blaydes, 2008), locate pockets of popular discontent (Ames, 1970; Magaloni, 2006; Brownlee, 2007; Blaydes, 2008; Cox, 2009), and identify effective party cadres (Birney, 2007; Blaydes, 2008).<sup>3</sup> As Lust-Okar (2006) writes, “the logic of authoritarian elections should lead us to question the value of pressing for, and applauding, the introduction of elections in authoritarian regimes.” We argue, however, that even weak electoral constraints force autocrats to acknowledge policy failures, which are occasionally damning. To persuade citizens of the regime's merits, electorally constrained autocrats must occasionally incriminate themselves and risk exacerbating popular frustration.

### III. Data

To test our theory, we constructed a dataset of state-run newspapers that contains over five million articles from 68 countries in six languages. We began by cataloging the world's state-run newspapers — those owned directly by the state, like the *People's Daily* in China, or by members of the ruling elite.<sup>4</sup> We then imposed two restrictions. First, we focused on languages for which quantitative text analysis methods are well developed: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Span-

<sup>2</sup>To be clear, this mechanism is as much about a citizen's own beliefs as it is about a citizen's beliefs about other citizens' beliefs (Little, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) provide an excellent overview of this research program.

<sup>4</sup>We exclude newspapers intended for a foreign audience, since our focus is on inward facing propaganda.



ish. Second, we focused on newspapers with online archives. Our dataset includes state-run newspapers from countries that cumulatively comprise 93% of the world's citizens who live in autocracies. As a baseline for comparison, we also include newspapers in democracies that meet our criteria. Many of these are holdovers from a previous autocratic regime and are generally regarded as legitimate news sources, such as Senegal's *Le Soleil*. We obtained newspapers by scraping their online archives using Python or manually downloading articles from Lexis Nexis.

Though critical for data collection, the restriction to newspapers with online archives creates the possibility of selection bias. It is possible, for instance, that autocrats who finance online archives may do so because their populations enjoy better Internet access, and so are constrained to employ more neutral coverage. Although we cannot rule this out, we found that autocrats who govern poor countries are as likely to maintain online archives as those from more affluent countries. A substantial majority of autocrats make their state-run newspapers available and accessible without restriction online. Since propaganda is useful only when consumed, most autocrats maximize its distribution, and so seldom regard it as intellectual property. This is consistent with their approach to domestic distribution. In the Republic of Congo, for instance, President Denis Sassou Nguesso subsidizes his *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville* so that its retail price is 20% that of its independent competitors. In democracies, state-affiliated newspapers are far more likely to operate as a business, with articles behind paywalls.

To convert text into propaganda data, we used Python to count references to each executive's surname and political party, as well as country-specific honorifics. In English, these most often included "president", "head of state", or "prime minister". In monarchies, these included "His Majesty" in Brunei or "The Leader" in Libya. Although these honorifics are critical — they routinely account for more than half of all executive references — they create the possibility of measurement error. To minimize this, we developed two filters. First, we employed a *look behind filter*. If multiple references occurred within the same 20-word concordance segment, we counted the final reference

only. This avoided double counting phrases like "President Sassou Nguesso". Second, we employed a *foreign executive filter*. If a foreign country was referenced five words before or after an executive identifier, we assumed that a foreign executive had been referenced, and consequently omitted it. In an article from Congo's *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*, this helps us avoid counting references to "President Xi Jinping of China" as a reference to Sassou Nguesso. Across languages, our algorithm identifies the precise number of executive references in a given article with nearly 85% accuracy.

Next, we extracted the 10 words before and after each reference. Using standard semantic dictionaries, we measured the extent to which these 20 words were fulsome or critical.<sup>5</sup> We then calculated the difference between the number of these words that were positive and the number of these words that were negative. Our first measure of pro-regime propaganda is simply this quantity averaged over each set of 20 words associated with references to the autocrat or ruling party in article *j* on day *t*. We refer to this measure as *Positive Coverage Standardized*. This measure reflects Goebbels' view that propaganda should be defined as coverage bias, not whether an assertion is strictly true or false.

This measure of pro-regime propaganda may be restrictive. Perhaps propaganda reveals itself over the course of a given news article, rather than in the 20 words surrounding references to the autocrat or ruling party. Perhaps pro-regime propaganda should also include government ministers and local appointees (Carter and Hassan, 2018). To create a second, less restrictive measure of pro-regime propaganda, we employed machine learning techniques to identify all articles about government action, at any level. The basic idea is that the words associated with government action are different than the words associated with sports or culture. We then 'trained' a computer to recognize this set of words and label articles accordingly. To make our data as useful as possible to other scholars, we trained our classifier to recognize 29 other topics, including the economy, public goods, human rights, sports, international engagements, and international news. Across languages, our classifier achieved a 90% accuracy rate.

Our second measure of pro-regime propaganda

<sup>5</sup>For English, we used the [Harvard General Inquirer \(2015\)](#), and for Chinese, we used the dictionaries provided by [Dong and Dong \(2014\)](#). We translated the Harvard General Inquirer into all of our other languages. We used the pre-processing techniques outlined in [Grimmer and Stewart \(2013\)](#).



measures the aggregate valence of all articles labeled as being about ‘government action.’ We refer to this as *Article Valence*, and we compute it by calculating the total number of positive words minus the total number of negative words, standardized by the total number of dictionary hits, in article  $j$  on day  $t$ . This standardization takes account of the possibility that different language dictionaries may not share the same level of quality. If, for instance, valence dictionaries for the English language are more thorough than those in Arabic or Russian, standardizing by dictionary hits should correct accordingly.

#### IV. Estimation and Results

Figure 1 presents one of the key results in our book. For each country in our dataset, we compute the mean value of *Positive Coverage Standardized*, our primary measure of pro-regime propaganda. To operationalize the electoral constraints on an autocrat, we use country  $i$ ’s Polity score in year  $s$ , and then compute each country’s mean for the sample period. The associated bivariate scatterplot appears in the left panel of Figure 1. The right panel presents an analogous scatterplot for the mean value of *Article Valence*. These descriptive statistics should be treated with caution, since there may be systematic differences across languages. Still, they are strikingly consistent with our theory — where electoral constraints are more binding, pro-regime propaganda is less flattering.

This relationship is robust to a range of estimation strategies and control variables. We estimate models where the unit of analysis is the country-article. We estimate models where the unit of analysis is the country-year. In some models, we focus on the different levels of pro-regime propaganda. In other models, we focus on changes in pro-regime propaganda. We control for features of a country’s information environment, like trade openness and Internet penetration. We control for citizens’ welfare and their education levels. We control for elections, civil wars, and other potential confounders. We also accommodate the possibility that the relationship between electoral constraints and pro-regime propaganda is non-linear. Whatever our approach, the relationship between electoral constraints and pro-regime propaganda is unchanged.

To help readers intuitively scale our point estimates, we adapted our measures of pro-regime propaganda to

measure how Fox News covers Republicans and how it covers Democrats. This difference — the magnitude of Fox News’ pro-Republican bias — constitutes a single unit of our Fox News Index. Our central result is this: Propaganda in electorally constrained autocracies is roughly as pro-regime as Fox News is pro-Republican. In the most repressive dictatorships, by contrast, propaganda apparatuses are between five and ten times more pro-regime as Fox News is pro-Republican.

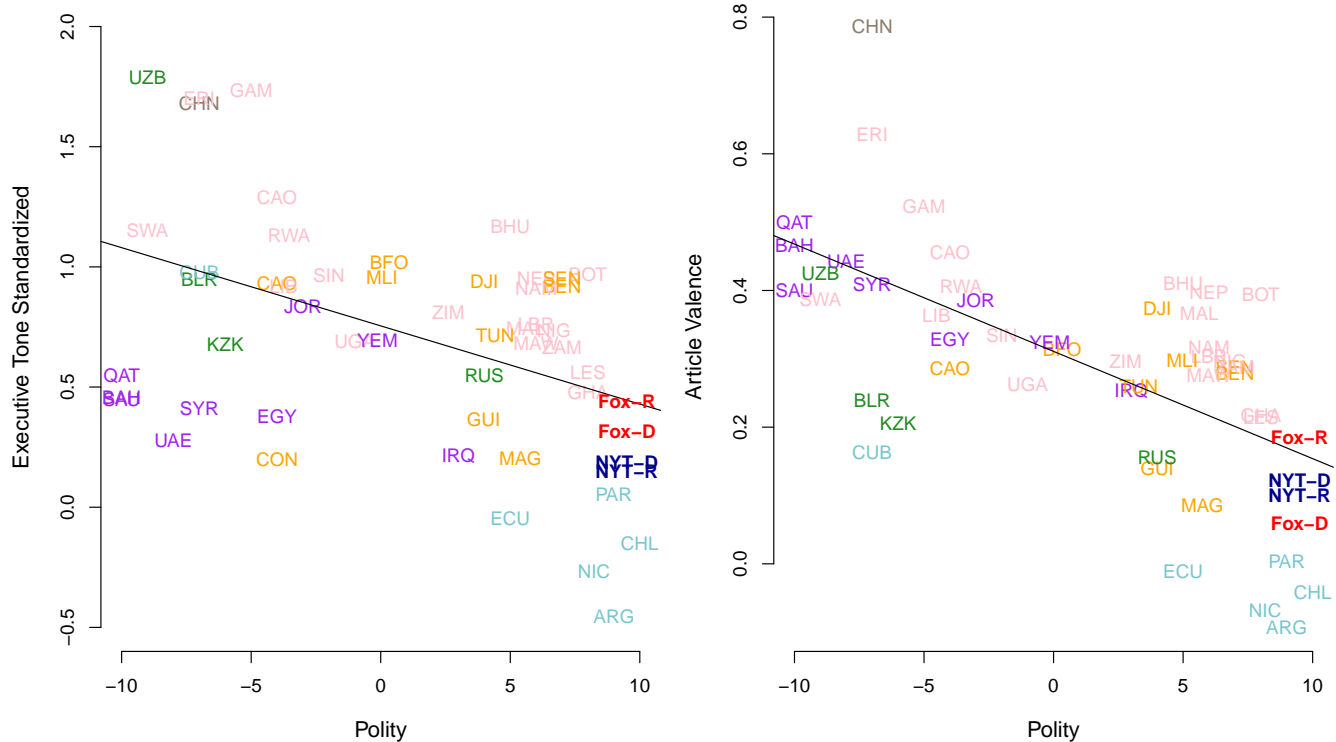
In short, the most repressive dictatorships employ absurd propaganda. In contrast, autocrats who are forced to acquire some amount of popular support are forced into a Bayesian propaganda strategy.

#### V. Threats to Inference: Reverse Causality and Omitted Variable Bias

There are two reasons to treat these cross-national results with caution. First, they may be driven by reverse causality. If propaganda works, then propaganda spikes may actually *loosen* electoral constraints. Second, the cross-national results may also be driven by omitted variable bias. Although we attempt to control for features that may be correlated with changes in electoral constraints and propaganda strategies, there may be features that remain unobserved. To ensure that this is not the case, we focus in on two countries for which the historical reach of our data is especially striking: Gabon to the 1970s and China to the 1940s.

We exploit a rapid, exogenous change in the electoral constraints confronted by many autocrats, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa: the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. With the Cold War over, Africa’s autocrats lost the ability to pit the United States against the Soviet Union, and hence bid up the price for their geopolitical support. Western governments began to attach genuine political conditions to their development aid and debt relief, conditions with which Africa’s autocrats were largely forced to comply (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997; Levitsky and Way, 2010). In Gabon, President Omar Bongo, in power since 1967, conceded a range of reforms to curry popular support. He increased civil servant salaries. He legalized political parties and independent newspapers. He convened a National Conference, which reduced presidential terms from seven years to five, imposed a two-term term limit, and created a more independent judiciary. As our theory predicts, Bongo also adopted a far more moderate propaganda

Figure 1: Pro-regime Propaganda by Polity Score



*Note:* Country abbreviations are shaded by language.

strategy. Using a Bayesian change point model, we identify the date of this strategy shift as either September 1990, which coincides with the first multiparty legislative elections since 1967, or March 1990, when Bongo announced the National Conference.

We find no such change in China, where the CCP was less vulnerable to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Again, we find that propaganda is driven by politics. Propaganda climaxed during the 1966-1969 high period of the Cultural Revolution and ebbed during Deng Xiaoping's 1980s reforms. The nationwide pro-democracy movement of 1989 prompted the CCP to amplify repression in the 1990s and 2000s, and propaganda rose again. Just after Xi Jinping abolished term limits in 2018, executive coverage returned to Cultural Revolution levels. Contra expectations that economic development will lead to less biased media (Besley and Prat, 2006; McMillan and Zoido, 2004; Corneo, 2006; Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Tella and Franceschelli, 2011; Hamilton, 2004; Gentzkow, Glaeser and Goldin, 2006; Petrova, 2008, 2011, 2012; Qin, Strömberg and Wu, 2018), we find no evidence that the exponential increases in prosperity,

education, and Internet penetration that China experienced had any moderating effects on Chinese propaganda.

## VI. The Political Opposition

How do propaganda apparatuses cover an autocrat's rivals? To answer this question, we created an exhaustive list of opposition leaders and parties for each country in our sample. At a minimum, this entailed identifying every candidate that competed in a national election, as well as the senior leaders of every party that competed in a legislative election. We also included political dissidents, political prisoners, and civil society activists, who would likely emerge as prominent politicians if opposition was legal. At a minimum, our rosters count several dozen opposition identifiers for each country; in some cases, we count several hundred. We then measured the tone of opposition coverage as we did regime coverage.

We find little evidence that autocrats ‘go negative’. Where autocrats confront electoral constraints, opposition coverage is strikingly neutral. Disparaging the

opposition, after all, in the context of our theory, may undermine credibility. Where autocrats confront no electoral constraints, opposition coverage is rare and *positive*. Rather than disparage regime opponents — which would signal to citizens which opposition leaders the regime fears — these propaganda apparatuses instead limit coverage to a ‘moderate’ opposition, which does not contest the regime’s legitimacy.

## VII. Narratives

Propaganda is about more than just coverage of the regime or opposition. It is also about narratives — what is emphasized, what is omitted, how details are spun, and so on (Rozenas and Stukal, *Forthcoming*). Our data enable us to glimpse how these narratives vary across autocracies. The twin strategies of absurd propaganda in repressive autocracies and Bayesian propaganda in constrained autocracies together yield a series of ironies. Governments that most egregiously violate their citizens’ basic rights are most likely to trumpet their democracy. Constrained autocracies, meanwhile, point to foreign observers and election commissions as evidence of a credible electoral process. Governments that are treated as pariahs by the international community are most likely to celebrate their bilateral relationships with foreign powers. Constrained autocracies, meanwhile, emphasize their joint efforts with the international community to improve citizen welfare. The most repressive dictatorships make absurd claims about economic performance, while constrained autocracies — which need citizen support — routinely cover malnutrition, vaccine shortages, and, in one case, fuel scarcities in Africa’s fourth leading oil producer.

## VIII. Threats

Although repression may be a defining feature of autocracies, there is little systematic research on when autocrats threaten citizens with violence (Davenport, 2007). To understand the politics of propaganda-based threats, we combine our theory with insights from experimental psychology. We argue that even credible threats of violence are costly. For propaganda apparatuses that aim to persuade citizens of regime merits, threats of violence should be invalidating. For propaganda apparatuses that signal to citizens the regime’s repressive capacity, the force of a threat may diminish in how often it is issued. For these reasons, we expect threats of violence to be virtually absent in constrained autocracies, and yet

still relatively rare in the most repressive autocracies.

Threats of violence are contextually specific: allusions that are threatening in one context may be benign in another. Empirically, therefore, we employ a series of paired comparisons. In China, we find that propaganda-based threats are salient, but cluster around the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements. By contrast, in Tunisia, as the Arab Spring uprising intensified and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali effectively lost control of the military (Signé and Smida, 2014), his propaganda apparatus sought to persuade citizens of the regime’s merits: by conceding the government’s failure to improve living standards and highlighting its efforts to do better.

Of course, Xi Jinping’s China and Ben Ali’s Tunisia may be different in ways that render propaganda-based threats more common in China than Tunisia, and for reasons unrelated to propaganda strategies. To help rule out the possibility that unobserved differences are driving the observed differences in propaganda-based threats, we focus on variation within a single country: Cameroon, where 20% of the country speaks English and 80% speaks French. These linguistic divisions are political. Since independence in 1960, Cameroon has had just two presidents: Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1982) and Paul Biya (1982-). Both have been francophone, both have governed almost entirely with a francophone elite, and both have consistently privileged the interests of francophone citizens. Biya’s propaganda newspaper, the *Cameroon Tribune*, publishes articles in English and French, and so can target Biya’s political in-group and out-group with different propaganda messages. In our book, we show that Biya’s propaganda apparatus attempts to persuade the francophone in-group of the regime’s merits, while threatening the anglophone out-group with violence.

## IX. Future Research

Our efforts to measure propaganda across autocracies uncovered new questions, to which the tools we developed can be adapted. First, we found that autocrats routinely maintain multiple propaganda apparatuses on the *same media platform*. China’s major state-run newspapers include the *People’s Daily*, the *Global Times*, the *PLA Daily*, the *Workers’ Daily*, and the *China Youth Daily*. The government also maintains more than 30 provincial newspapers. When do autocrats maintain

multiple propaganda apparatuses? Does propaganda vary across them?

In our book, we focused on ‘inward-facing’ propaganda that seeks to manipulate the beliefs of a domestic citizenry. Yet many autocrats maintain ‘outward-facing’ propaganda apparatuses that target citizens abroad. Of these, *Russia Today* (RT) and *China Daily* are the most noteworthy, but they are certainly not the only ones. In Central Africa, Paul Biya and Teodoro Obiang, who have ruled Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, respectively, for a cumulative 75 years, jointly own Africa 24. Denis Sassou Nguesso lured Euronews’s Africa subsidiary, Africanews, to Brazzaville by offering them a gleaming skyscraper along the Congo River. Sassou Nguesso also provided the capital for *Forbes Afrique*, which circulates widely among Africa’s financial elite. When do autocrats invest in propaganda apparatuses that target citizens abroad? How should we understand their content?

Citizens’ minds have long constituted the chief battleground on which the struggle for political change in autocracies is waged. As Tullock (1987) put it, “As long as people think that the dictator’s power is secure, it is secure.” Our book makes clear that autocrats wage the battle for their citizens’ minds strategically. It is not random, nor is it a function of an autocrat’s whims or idiosyncrasies. And it can be understood with the tools of computational social science.

## References

- Adena, Maja, Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, Veronica Santarosa and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2015. “Radio and the rise of the Nazis in prewar Germany.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130(4):1885–1939.
- Ames, Barry. 1970. “Bases of support for Mexico’s dominant party.” *American Political Science Review* 64(1):153–167.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Aronow, Peter M., Allison Carnegie and Nikolay Marinov. 2017. “Foreign aid, human rights and democracy promotion: Evidence from a natural experiment.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61:671–683.
- Besley, Timothy and Andrea Prat. 2006. “Handcuffs for the grabbing hand? Media capture and government accountability.” *American Economic Review* 96(3):720–736.
- Birney, Mayling Edina. 2007. “Can Local Elections Contribute to Democratic Progress in Authoritarian Regimes?: Exploring the Political Ramifications of China’s Village Elections.” Ph.D. Thesis, Yale University.
- Blaydes, Lisa. 2008. “Authoritarian elections and elite management: Theory and evidence from Egypt.” Paper presented at the Princeton University Conference on Dictatorships, April.
- Bratton, Michael and Nicholas Van de Walle. 1997. *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brownlee, Jason. 2007. *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, Brett L. and Mai Hassan. 2018. “The political geography of the local security apparatus: Evidence from Congo and Kenya.” Unpublished manuscript, University of Southern California.
- Carter, Erin Baggott and Brett L. Carter. 2018. “Focal Moments and Popular Protests in Autocracies: Evidence from China.” Unpublished manuscript, University of Southern California.
- Corneo, Giacomo. 2006. “Media capture in a democracy: The role of wealth concentration.” *Journal of Public Economics* 90(1-2):37–58.
- Cox, Gary W. 2009. “Authoritarian elections and leadership succession, 1975–2004.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto.
- Davenport, Christian. 2007. “State repression and political order.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10:1–23.
- DellaVigna, Stefano and Ethan Kaplan. 2007. “The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122(3):1187–1234.
- Dong, Zhendong and Qoamg Dong. 2014. “Positive and Negative Valence Dictionaries.”
- Doob, Leonard W. 1950. “Goebbels’ principles of propaganda.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14(3):419–442.
- Enikolopov, Ruben, Maria Petrova and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2011. “Media and political persuasion: Evidence from Russia.” *American Economic Review* 101(7):3253–85.
- Gandhi, Jennifer. 2008. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gandhi, Jennifer and Adam Przeworski. 2007. “Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats.” *Comparative Political Studies* 40(11):1279–1301.
- Gandhi, Jennifer and Ellen Lust-Okar. 2009. “Elections under authoritarianism.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12:403–422.
- Gehlbach, Scott and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. “Government control of the media.” *Journal of Public Economics* 118:163–171.
- Gentzkow, Matthew, Edward L. Glaeser and Claudia Goldin. 2006. The rise of the Fourth Estate: How newspapers became informative and why it mattered. In *Corruption and Reform: Lessons from America’s Economic History*, ed. Ed-



- ward L. Glaeser and Claudia Goldin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gentzkow, Matthew and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2006. "Media bias and reputation." *Journal of Political Economy* 114(2):280–316.
- Grimmer, Justin and Brandon M. Stewart. 2013. "Text as data: The promise and pitfalls of automatic content analysis methods for political texts." *Political Analysis* 21(3):267–297.
- Hamilton, James T. 2004. *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Harvard General Inquirer. 2015. "Positiv and Negativ Semantic Dictionaries."
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. "Propaganda as signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47(4):419–444.
- Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Levy, Jacob T. 2016. "Authoritarianism and post-truth politics." *Niskanen Center Blog*, November 30.
- Little, Andrew T. 2017. "Propaganda and credulity." *Games and Economic Behavior* 102:224–232.
- Lust-Okar, Ellen. 2006. "Elections under authoritarianism: Preliminary lessons from Jordan." *Democratization* 13(3):456–471.
- Magaloni, Beatriz. 2006. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Magaloni, Beatriz. 2008. "Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(4-5):715–741.
- McMillan, John and Pablo Zoido. 2004. "How to subvert democracy: Montesinos in Peru." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18(4):69–92.
- New York Times. 2010. "What Chinese censors don't want you to know." March 21.
- Petrova, Maria. 2008. "Inequality and media capture." *Journal of Public Economics* 92(1-2):183–212.
- Petrova, Maria. 2011. "Newspapers and parties: How advertising revenues created an independent press." *American Political Science Review* 105(4):790–808.
- Petrova, Maria. 2012. "Mass media and special interest groups." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 84(1):17–38.
- Qin, Bei, David Strömberg and Yanhui Wu. 2018. "Media bias in China." *American Economic Review* 108(9):2442–2476.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rozenas, Arturas and Denis Stukal. Forthcoming. "How autocrats manipulate economic news: Evidence from Russia's state-controlled television." *Journal of Politics*.
- Signé, Landry and Remy Smida. 2014. "The army's decision to repress: A turning point in Tunisia's regime change." Working Paper, Center of Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law.
- Taylor, Richard. 1998. *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*. New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Tella, Rafael Di and Ignacio Franceschelli. 2011. "Government advertising and media coverage of corruption scandals." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 3(4):119–151.
- Tullock, Gordon. 1987. *Autocracy*. New York: Springer.
- Wedeen, Lisa. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wright, Joseph. 2008. "Do authoritarian institutions constrain? How legislatures affect economic growth and investment." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(2):322–343.
- Yanagizawa-Drott, David. 2014. "Propaganda and conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan genocide." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(4):1947–1994.

## Strategic Campaign Sentiment

by Charles Crabtree

University of Michigan

Matt Golder

Pennsylvania State University

Thomas Gschwend

University of Mannheim

and Indriði H. Indriðason

University of California, Riverside

### I. Introduction

Politicians often face strong incentives to misrepresent their preferences, intentions, and accomplishments. During an election campaign, for example, political parties have an incentive to make popular policy promises they have no intention of honoring if they win. When negotiating the formation of a government, parties have an incentive to accept coalition agreements they have little intention of implementing. Incumbent government parties have an incentive to exaggerate their policy successes, while the opposition has an incentive to cast the incumbent's track-record in a somewhat different light. The rewards from strategically employing misleading information in a successful manner are potentially substantial, and include things like electoral success and participation in the government.



Despite these strong incentives, the amount of misinformation from political actors in most democracies is usually fairly limited. Empirical evidence suggests, for example, that parties tend to keep the policy promises they make on the campaign trail once they enter office (Thomson et al., 2017) and that they tend to abide by the coalition agreements they negotiate when serving in government (Moury, 2013). This is, however, perhaps not too surprising. Parties that routinely fail to keep their campaign promises and renege on their coalition agreements are liable to quickly lose their credibility.

The extent to which political actors in democracies avoid misrepresenting their preferences or intentions is likely to have something to do with the verifiability of their claims. Failing to implement policy promises that have been described in detail in a party's campaign manifesto or a coalition agreement opens a party up to criticism from voters, the media, and, perhaps most importantly, from other parties that seek to gain advantage by exposing the party's failure to act on its words and follow through on its promises. Thus, there are good reasons to think that politicians will be more likely to manipulate information when their claims are more difficult to verify or challenge. This is in line with the essay by Horz (2018) in this issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*, which suggests that, as verifying information is costly, voters will only seek to verify the claims of politicians when they veer too far from their prior beliefs. In this framework, then, the harder and more costly it is to verify information, the greater the incentives for information manipulation. As Little (2018) notes in his essay, though, things are actually more complicated than this. One limitation of strategies of misinformation is that voters expect politicians to misrepresent the truth and, accordingly, can be expected to discount their claims — and that logic can be expected to extend to the choice of the things politicians choose to misrepresent information about. That is, a rational voter will expect claims that are difficult to verify to be more likely to be inaccurate and either discount them accordingly or be more willing to investigate the claims further (despite the greater difficulty).

Much of the literature on propaganda and the politics of misinformation focuses, as we have done so far, on whether the statements made by political actors are accurate or inaccurate, true or false. Importantly, though, the repertoire of strategies available to political actors who wish to change the attitudes and behavior of

their citizens is not limited to a dichotomous choice between telling the truth and outright lies. In their contribution to the *Newsletter*, for example, Rozenas and Stukal (2018) point out that political actors can engage in different forms of hard information manipulation (censorship and distortion) and soft information manipulation (distraction and selective attribution), only some of which involve the use of outright lies. While broader than the conceptual framework employed in much of the literature, the one provided by Rozenas and Stukal (2018) still focuses on the *informational content* of political statements.

Existing scholarship has tended to focus on how political actors strategically manipulate the content of the information available to citizens. As we have suggested, though, political actors can also seek to manipulate our attitudes and behavior through 'information-free' statements and the rhetorical language in which they wrap up their claims about the world.

As Horz (2018) notes in his essay, though, political actors can also use rhetoric and “information-free statements” to alter the attitudes and behavior of citizens. Although political scientists generally focus on some aspect of the informational content of political statements, critical discourse theorists have for a long time understood that political discourse itself – the words we use to convey our ideas, claims, and arguments – can be used to construct and perpetuate particular world views that affect individual attitudes and behavior, and serve the interests of political actors (Edelman, 1964, 1977, 1985; Foucault, 1972). Discourse theorists have examined the use and meaning of both lexical (co-location of words, metaphors, euphemisms, naming devices) and grammatical features (tense, aspect, voice) of political discourse. As an example, Breeze (2011) looks at the discursive style and phraseology used by political parties in their manifestos for the 2010 elections in the United Kingdom. She discusses how the parties were engaged in “framing contests” and how they used “deictic devices of a personal, social, temporal, spatial or discursive type ... to project group identity, signal or create a sense of solidarity, identify insiders and outsiders ... [and as] a strategy to rope the people/reader

into” supporting a party’s agenda (Breeze, 2011, 16).

Of particular interest to us here is the use of emotive rhetoric by political actors during election campaigns. Importantly, we know that the language we use can engender different types of sentiment, such as fear, anxiety, and optimism (Roseman, Abelson and Ewing, 1986; Pennebaker, 1993), and that individuals process information differently depending on their emotional mood (Schwarz, 2000; Clore, Gasper and Garvin, 2001). It is widely recognized that political actors make emotional appeals to the public (Hart, Childers and Lind, 2013), and recent studies have shown that campaign messages can be manipulated to trigger emotional responses that, in turn, produce predictable changes in voter behavior (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen, 2000; Brader, 2005, 2006; Brader and Marcus, 2013; Huddy and Gunthorsdottir, 2000; Weber, Searles and Ridout, 2011; Utych, 2018).

If this is all true, then political actors should be strategic in their use of emotion in their campaign messages. This is precisely what we look at in our paper, ‘It’s not only what you say, it’s also how you say it: The strategic use of campaign sentiment’ (Crabtree et al., 2018). Specifically, our paper examines the extent to which political parties adopt language that conveys positive or negative sentiment in their campaign messages. Campaign messages that include positive emotive language encourage people to adopt a positive frame when evaluating the world around them, whereas campaign messages that include negative emotive language have the opposite effect. Our analysis of the party manifestos in eight European countries over a thirty year time period finds that the level of positive sentiment that parties adopt in their campaigns is consistent with strategic behavior and depends, among other things, on their incumbency status and objective economic conditions.

## II. Campaign Strategies and Campaign Sentiment

Existing research tends to focus on two dimensions of electoral campaigns: (1) campaign content and (2) campaign focus. *Campaign content* refers to whether parties campaign on policy or valence, whereas *campaign focus* has to do with whether parties focus their messages on themselves or their competitors.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars of-

ten examine these two dimensions in isolation, they can be put together to obtain four ‘pure’ types of electoral campaigns, as shown in Figure 1. A *spatial campaign* is one in which parties appeal to voters by highlighting their own policies. This is the type of campaign captured in traditional spatial models of electoral competition. A *comparative campaign* is one in which parties seek to emphasize the inferiority of their opponent’s policies. This is similar to a ‘comparative advertising’ campaign in the economic sphere, where companies highlight the inferiority of a competitor’s product by comparing it to their own (Barry, 1993). A *valence campaign* is one in which parties appeal to voters by emphasizing their own valence characteristics. In contrast, an *attack campaign* is one in which parties point out the poor valence qualities of their opponents. This last type of campaign is often what the media have in mind when they talk about ‘dirty politics’ and ‘negative campaigning’. This two dimensional conceptualization of electoral campaigns focuses on *what* parties say and *who* they say it about.

This conceptual framework clearly allows for the use of misinformation by political parties. For example, parties can attempt to misrepresent the policy positions and valence of their opponents in order to make them appear extreme or incompetent. Similarly, parties can seek to overstate their own competence and proximity to the median voter (or some other ideological position that maximizes their vote share.) In each of these examples, parties are attempting to strategically alter the informational content of their campaign messages to suit their political purposes.

One aspect of electoral campaigns that is ignored in this two-dimensional framework is campaign sentiment, which refers to the emotive content of campaigns. Whereas campaign content and campaign focus address *what* parties say and *who* they say it about, campaign sentiment addresses *how* they say it. As we noted earlier, political actors can influence individual attitudes and behavior not only by altering the informational and substantive content of their claims but also by changing the emotive rhetoric they use to make those claims. Utych (2018), for example, finds that the emotive language used to describe political candidates influences how those candidates are evaluated even after

<sup>1</sup>The campaign focus dimension is often referred to in the literature as *campaign tone*, with messages that focus on one’s own party considered positive and those that focus on other parties considered negative (Geer, 2006). In our opinion, this terminology is problematic as it confuses the *target* of a campaign message with the *tone* of the message.

Figure 1: A Two-Dimensional Conceptualization of Electoral Campaigns

		Campaign Focus	
		Own Party	Other Party
Campaign Content	Policy	'Spatial' Campaign	'Comparative' Campaign
	Valence	'Valence' Campaign	'Attack' Campaign

controlling for the informational content of the candidate descriptions. Empirically, the emotive content of campaigns does not strongly correlate with either of the two dimensions shown in Figure 1. For example, campaigns that focus on one's own party do not always contain positive emotive content, and those that focus on the opposition do not always contain negative emotive content (Ridout and Searles, 2011). Conceptually and empirically, campaign sentiment represents a third and distinct dimension of electoral campaigns.

Our theory of the strategic use of campaign sentiment is situated in the retrospective voting literature. Models of retrospective voting assume that individuals vote based on how they perceive the state of the world at election time. The state of the world is usually attributed in some way to the performance of the incumbent government, with good performance rewarded and poor performance punished. Typically, the retrospective voting literature thinks about the state of the world in economic terms — incumbents are expected to do better when unemployment and inflation are low and when economic growth is high (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). If vote choice is influenced by how we perceive the state of the world, then parties have incentives to shape those perceptions through their campaigns (Vavreck, 2009). Parties can obviously shape voter perceptions through their substantive campaign messages where they provide information about how things are

going. However, they can also shape voter perceptions through the emotive content of their campaign messages. In advanced democracies, where transparency is high and reliable economic statistics are readily available, the scope for parties to alter perceptions about the state of the world through substantive information is relatively circumscribed. Parties have greater freedom, though, when it comes to the emotive rhetoric they use to convey the informational content in their campaign messages.

The level of positive sentiment that parties adopt in their campaigns should depend, among other things, on their incumbency status and objective economic conditions.<sup>2</sup> Incumbent parties, who are typically held responsible for the current state of the world, would like voters to view things in a positive light. As a result, we can expect incumbent parties to use a lot of positive emotive rhetoric in their campaign messages. Opposition parties stand to gain from painting a less rosy picture of the incumbent's performance and are, thus, likely to use much lower levels of positive sentiment in their messages. Responsibility attribution is straightforward in the case of single-party governments but more challenging when the government consists of a coalition of parties (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Duch, Przepiorka and Stevenson, 2015). The prime minister's role as the head of government and the chief agenda setter (Norpoth and Gschwend, 2010; Duch and Stevenson, 2013) means that voters are likely to attribute greater responsi-

<sup>2</sup>In our paper, we examine other determinants of positive sentiment, including a party's policy position (Crabtree et al., 2018).

bility for the current state of the world to the prime ministerial party than to the other members of the coalition government. As a result, prime ministerial parties have an added incentive to use positive campaign sentiment and can be expected to outdo their coalition partners in that regard.

While parties will try to use emotive rhetoric to alter voter perceptions of the state of the world, we expect that the extent to which they can do this is constrained by economic reality (Parker-Stephen, 2013; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016). Deviating too far from objective reality will eventually undermine the credibility of a party's messages and, perhaps, in line with what Horz (2018) suggests in his essay, invite unwanted scrutiny from the voters. In other words, the emotive rhetoric used in campaign messages can't be too positive when times are bad or too negative when times are good, otherwise voters will become suspicious. This suggests that the level of positive campaign sentiment exhibited by all parties should vary with the objective state of the economy.

### III. Campaign Sentiment in Party Manifestos

To test our theoretical claims, we examine the use of emotive language in European party manifestos. We recognize that manifestos are only one type of campaign message, but as we explain in our paper, they have certain advantages over other forms of campaign messages when it comes to testing our theory.<sup>3</sup> To summarize, manifestos provide parties with an opportunity to directly place their campaign strategy before voters in a carefully scripted way that is unfiltered by the media; they outline the overarching campaign strategy of parties in a way that, say, party press releases do not; they are a type of campaign message that is used across Europe, thus facilitating cross-national comparison; and they are available for a long period of time, thereby allowing us to examine how the same parties change their use of campaign sentiment over time as they move in and out of office. Our analysis is based on over 400 party manifestos from over 100 parties from eight European countries covering the years from 1980 to 2012.

We use the dictionary-based *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC) program to measure campaign sentiment (Pennebaker, Booth and Francis, 2007). LIWC has been widely used in the social sciences and increasingly in political science (Bryan and Ringsmuth, 2016; Corley and Wedeking, 2014; Owens and Wedeking, 2011, 2012; Settle et al., 2016). LIWC identifies the percentage of words in a document belonging to several categories, such as verbs or psychological constructs such as affect or cognition. We focus on two LIWC categories that capture our interest in positive campaign sentiment: (i) positive emotive words and (ii) negative emotive words. As manifestos contain both positive and negative words, our dependent variable, *Positive Sentiment*, is calculated as the *positive words score* minus the *negative words score* for a given manifesto. The theoretical range for our dependent variable is  $[-100\%, 100\%]$ , with larger percentages indicating greater positive sentiment. Since most of the words we use lack emotional valence, the empirical range for our dependent variable is significantly smaller,  $[-0.68\%, 7.60\%]$ .<sup>4</sup>

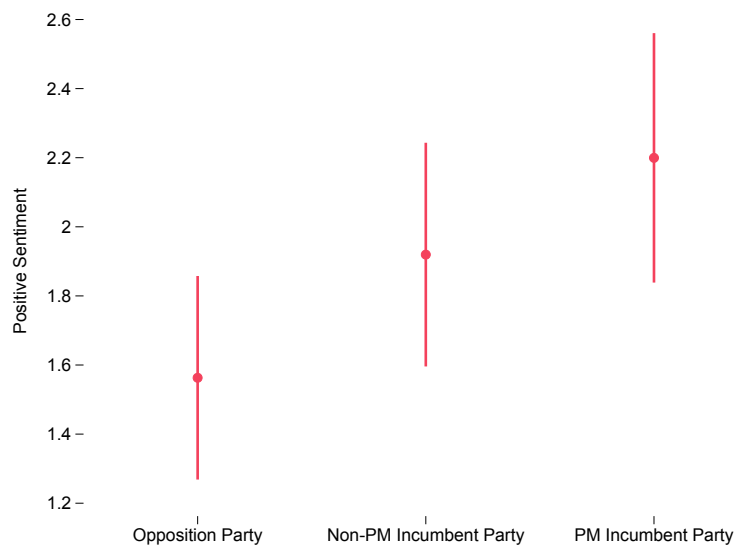
Figure 2 graphically summarizes our results with respect to incumbency status. It shows how the predicted level of *Positive Sentiment* changes with a party's incumbency status, along with two-tailed 95% confidence intervals. In line with our theoretical expectations, incumbent government parties use more positive sentiment than opposition parties, and prime ministerial incumbent parties use more positive sentiment than non-prime ministerial incumbent parties. To be specific, non-prime ministerial parties use 23% [12.9%, 34.5%] more positive sentiment than opposition parties, while prime ministerial incumbent parties exhibit 41% [30%, 53.8%] more positive sentiment than opposition parties.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, our results with respect to incumbency status are robust to the use of party fixed effects, indicating that the same party uses higher levels of positive sentiment when it's in the government as opposed to when it's in the opposition. Overall, our results here are consistent with the idea that parties think and act strategically when it comes to the use of emotive language in campaign manifestos.

<sup>3</sup>In the appendix to our paper, we also provide a case study of the 2013 elections in Germany where we examine the use of campaign sentiment in party manifestos, televised election debates, party election broadcasts, and on party websites.

<sup>4</sup>We use language fixed effects to take account of the considerable heterogeneity across languages in the use of positive and negative words.

<sup>5</sup>While the confidence intervals in Figure 2 overlap, this is not necessarily evidence that the differences between point estimates are statistically insignificant (Schenker and Gentleman, 2001). Indeed, formal tests involving interaction terms show that all of the point estimates shown in Figure 2 are significantly different from each other ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 2: *Positive Sentiment* and a Party's Incumbency Status



Note: Figure 2 plots the predicted level of *Positive Sentiment* conditional on incumbency status based on our OLS results. The lines represent two-tailed 95% confidence intervals.

As predicted, parties adopt less positive sentiment when the economy is performing poorly with respect to inflation and unemployment. These particular results suggest that campaign sentiment varies in line with objective economic conditions, just as a standard economic voting framework would lead us to expect. There is no evidence, however, that positive sentiment varies with economic growth. Interestingly, our results with respect to economic conditions are consistent with previous research showing that unemployment and inflation have a significantly stronger impact on the emotional polarity of British parliamentary debates than economic growth (Rheault et al., 2016). They are also consistent with research showing that the extent to which parties emphasize economic issues in their manifestos varies systematically with inflation and unemployment but not economic growth (Williams, Seki and Whitten, 2016). Combining these results suggests that objective economic conditions, at least with respect to inflation and unemployment, influence not only how much space parties give to economic issues in their manifestos but also the emotive content of the language that parties use to convey their political messages.

#### IV. Conclusion

As many of the contributions to this issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* indicate, political actors have

a variety of means at their disposal to manipulate the information environment and influence our behavior and attitudes. Existing scholarship has tended to focus on how political actors strategically manipulate the content of the information available to citizens. As we have suggested, though, political actors can also seek to manipulate our attitudes and behavior through ‘information-free’ statements and the rhetorical language in which they wrap up their claims about the world. In other words, political actors can be strategic not only about *what* information they provide, but also about *how* they present this information. In this sense, political actors, such as parties, have a larger arsenal of strategies available to them than is typically assumed in the existing literature on the politics of information. We encourage comparative politics scholars to pay more attention to the (emotive) rhetoric that political actors use to make their informational claims.

In our particular analysis, we find that political parties in European democracies use emotive sentiment in their campaign messages in a manner that is consistent with strategic behavior. We have shown, for example, that incumbent parties, and especially prime ministerial parties, adopt greater positive sentiment in their campaign messages than opposition parties. We have also shown that all parties adopt significantly less positive sentiment when objective economic conditions are



poor. That objective economic conditions constrain the strategic use of campaign sentiment is perhaps encouraging, because it suggests that electoral campaigns retain some accurate information content despite the incentives that parties have to manipulate voter emotions. On this point, the advent of 'fake news' and campaigns of deliberate misinformation that challenge media freedom and call into question the sources and reliability of objective (economic) data are a cause for concern. This is because these developments may serve to weaken the constraints offered by objective economic conditions and thereby provide parties with more room to engage in the strategic manipulation of voter emotions.

## References

- Barry, Thomas E. 1993. "Twenty years of comparative advertising." *International Journal of Advertising* 12:325–350.
- Brader, Ted. 2005. "Striking a responsive chord: How political ads motivate and persuade voters by appealing to emotions." *American Journal of Political Science* 49(2):388–405.
- Brader, Ted. 2006. *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brader, Ted and George E. Marcus. 2013. Emotions and political psychology. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears and Jack S. Levy. New York: Oxford University Press pp. 165–204.
- Breeze, Ruth. 2011. "Variations on a theme: Party manifesto discourses in the UK 2010 election." *Culture, Language and Representation* 9:9–30.
- Clore, Gerald L., Karen Gasper and Erika Garvin. 2001. Affect as information. In *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas. New York: Psychology Press pp. 121–144.
- Crabtree, Charles, Matt Golder, Thomas Gschwend and Indriði H. Indriðason. 2018. "It's not only what you say, it's also how you say it: The strategic use of campaign sentiment." Unpublished manuscript, Pennsylvania State University.
- Duch, Raymond M. and Randolph T. Stevenson. 2008. *The Economic Vote: How Political and Economic Institutions Condition Election Results*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Duch, Raymond and Randolph T. Stevenson. 2013. "Voter perceptions of agenda power and attribution of responsibility for economic performance." *Electoral Studies* 32:512–516.
- Duch, Raymond, Wojtek Przepiorka and Randolph T. Stevenson. 2015. "Responsibility attribution for collective decision makers." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2):372–389.
- Edelman, Murray. 1964. *The Symbolic Use of Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Edelman, Murray. 1977. *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail*. London: Academic Press.
- Edelman, Murray. 1985. "Political language and political reality." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 18(1):10–19.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock.
- Geer, John G. 2006. *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hart, Roderick P., Jay P. Childers and Colene J. Lind. 2013. *Political Tone: How Leaders Talk and Why*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Horz, Carlo. 2018. Informational and non-informational propaganda. In *Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation, Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 28(2).
- Huddy, Leonie and Anna H. Gunnthorsdottir. 2000. "The persuasive effects of emotive visual imagery: Superficial manipulation or the product of passionate reason?" *Political Psychology* 21(4):745–778.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S. and Mary Stegmaier. 2000. "Economic determinants of electoral outcomes." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3:183–219.
- Little, Andrew. 2018. Fake news, propaganda, and lies can be pervasive even if they aren't persuasive. In *Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation, Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 28(2).
- Marcus, George E., W. Russell Neuman and Michael MacKuen. 2000. *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moury, Catherine. 2013. *Coalition Government and Party Mandate: How Coalition Agreements Constrain Ministerial Action*. New York: Routledge.
- Norpoth, Helmut and Thomas Gschwend. 2010. "The chancellor model: Forecasting German elections." *International Journal of Forecasting* 26(1):42–53.
- Pardos-Prado, Sergi and Iñaki Sagarzazu. 2016. "The political conditioning of subjective economic evaluations: The role of party discourse." *British Journal of Political Science* 46(4):799–823.
- Parker-Stephen, Evan. 2013. "Tides of disagreement: How reality facilitates (and inhibits) partisan public opinion." *Journal of Politics* 75(4):1077–1088.
- Pennebaker, James W. 1993. "Putting stress into words: Health, linguistic, and therapeutic implications." *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 31(6):539–548.
- Pennebaker, James W., Roger J. Booth and Martha E. Francis. 2007. "Linguistic inquiry and word count: LIWC [Computer software]. Austin, TX: [Operator's manual]."
- Powell, G. Bingham and Guy D. Whitten. 1993. "A cross-national analysis of economic voting: Taking account of the political context." *American Journal of Political Science*

37(2):391–414.

- Rheault, Ludovic, Kaspar Beelen, Christopher Cochrane and Graeme Hirst. 2016. “Measuring emotion in parliamentary debates with automated textual analysis.” *PLOS One* 11(12).
- Ridout, Travis N. and Kathleen Searles. 2011. “It’s my campaign I’ll cry if I want to: How and when campaigns use emotional appeals.” *Political Psychology* 32(3):439–458.
- Roseman, Ira J., Robert P. Abelson and M. F. Ewing. 1986. Emotions and political cognition: Emotional appeals in political communication. In *Political Cognition*, ed. Richard Lau and David O. Sears. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum pp. 279–294.
- Rozenas, Arturas and Denis Stukal. 2018. How to measure information manipulation. In *Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation, Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 28(2).
- Schenker, Nathaniel and Jane F. Gentleman. 2001. “On judging the significance of differences by examining the overlap between confidence intervals.” *The American Statistician* 55:182–186.
- Schwarz, Norbert. 2000. “Emotion, cognition, and decision making.” *Cognition and Emotion* 14(4):433–440.
- Thomson, Robert, Terry Royed, Elin Naurin, Joaquín Artés, Rory Costello, Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik, Mark Ferguson, Petia Kostadinova, Catherine Moury, François Pétry et al. 2017. “The fulfillment of parties’ election pledges: A comparative study on the impact of power sharing.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61(3):527–542.
- Utych, Stephen M. 2018. “Negative affective language in politics.” *American Politics Research* 46(1):77–102.
- Vavreck, Lynn. 2009. *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Weber, Christopher, Kathleen Searles and Travis N. Ridout. 2011. “More than a feeling: The strategic use and consequence of emotion in campaign advertisements.” Paper presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.
- Williams, Laron K., Katsunori Seki and Guy D. Whitten. 2016. “You’ve got some explaining to do: The influence of economic conditions and spatial competition on party strategy.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 4(1):47–63.

## Foreign Native Advertising

by Yaoyao Dai

Pennsylvania State University

and Luwei Rose Luqiu

Hong Kong Baptist University

### I. Introduction

Since 2011, readers in the United States have been able to get news on China from a multi-page special section named *China Watch* in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times* (Cook, 2017; Fallows, 2011). Unfortunately, instead of being a special editorial column on China, the *China Watch* section is a paid supplement provided by *China Daily*, a Chinese government-controlled English-language newspaper (Fallows, 2011). As of March 2018, the *China Daily* had cooperated with, and provided *China Watch* content to, more than 40 legacy news media in over 20 countries with a circulation of 4 million people.<sup>1</sup> This is all part of *China Daily*’s strategy to use the platforms and reputations of partnership publishers to increase the worldwide audience for its news stories (China Daily, 2018). China is not the only country that pays western legacy media outlets to publish news stories from government-controlled media. *Russia Beyond*, a Russian government-controlled media outlet, has also paid to place news stories in the *Washington Post* under the name *Russia Now*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike conventional sponsored content or advertisements, the news stories provided by *China Watch* and *Russia Now* camouflage themselves as standard editorial content from the hosting media outlet. As a result, people are often unaware that they are reading sponsored and paid content provided by a foreign government.

Communication scholars and journalists refer to paid content and advertisements that camouflage themselves as standard editorial content as *native advertising*. These scholars have tended to focus on native advertising in the context of commercial products (Carlson, 2015; Iversen and Knudsen, 2017; Jamieson et al., 2000; Batsell, 2018; Edmonds, 2017; Einstein, 2016; Mullin, 2017). Given that foreign governments are paying for things like *China Watch*, we refer to this as *foreign native advertising*. While there is a large and growing litera-

<sup>1</sup>Legacy media refer to older and more traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio, in which the audience does not ‘interact’ with the media content.

<sup>2</sup>The hosted website and column [russianow.washingtonpost.com](http://russianow.washingtonpost.com) disappeared in 2015. For information and reports on *Russia Now*, see Barton (2015) and the *Washington Free Beacon* (2014).

ture on the media and propaganda in political science, much of it focuses on media ownership and the type of hard and heavy-handed propaganda that is easily detected (Di Tella and Franceschelli, 2011; Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Archer and Clinton, 2018; Huang, 2015, 2018; Little, 2017). Little attention has been paid to the type of soft propaganda found in foreign native advertising. This is despite the obvious political implications and ethical issues that are at stake.

Why would the independent mainstream media in a country put their reputation at risk by publishing the political messages of a foreign government? What impact does foreign native advertising have on news consumers? Why do governments engage in this type of foreign propaganda? There are many questions regarding foreign native advertising that need to be answered. In this short essay, we examine the motivation of the parties engaged in foreign native advertising.<sup>3</sup> In particular, we highlight how foreign native advertising helps ameliorate the control-credibility tradeoff faced by foreign governments and the revenue-credibility tradeoff faced by domestic media outlets. We also briefly describe some of the initial results from a survey experiment we conducted on foreign native advertising using real political stories placed by the Chinese government in the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph*. Somewhat alarmingly, we find that respondents are often unable to distinguish paid political advertisements from standard news articles, irrespective of their level of education and media literacy. Moreover, respondents rate the paid political advertisements in the Western mainstream media as more credible than the exact same content in the Chinese government-controlled news outlet, the *China Daily*.

## II. Foreign Native Advertising

International or foreign propaganda is not new. Governments have long engaged in various activities, such as state-owned international broadcasting and public relations campaigns, to influence public attitudes in foreign countries.<sup>4</sup> For example, throughout the Cold War, the U.S. government sponsored *Voice of America* to broadcast into the Soviet Union and its satellite states as a strategy to counter Soviet propaganda, and

has expanded the languages and geographic scope of its broadcasts since the end of the Cold War (Krugler, 2000). In addition to its government-funded international broadcasting activities, the United States has also implemented public relations campaigns in other countries in which it purchases space or services on a foreign country's media to broadcast messages targeting foreign citizens. One such program, the 'Shared Values Initiative', was targeted at the Muslim world after the September 11 attacks and saw the U.S. government pay local media in major Muslim countries to broadcast a series of commercials showing the positive aspects of Muslim life in the United States (Kendrick and Fullerton, 2004).

Unlike much of the historical political advertising in foreign media, foreign native advertising attempts to imitate the objective journalism of the hosting media outlets. Like *commercial* native advertising, foreign native advertising appears as editorial content in an attempt to recreate the experience of reading objective news stories, and in doing so aims to deceive readers. Readers often have no idea that what they are reading is paid content from a foreign government.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has also invested considerable resources in international broadcasting, such as through the foreign language services of Chinese Central Television (CCTV), with the goal of rectifying the perceived distortion in the international flow of information about China (Brady, 2015; Rawnsley, 2015; Edney, 2012). Studies show that China also uses its state news agency, Xinhua, to provide information directly to U.S. news outlets (Cheng, Golan and Kioussis, 2016). In addition to state-sponsored international broadcasting, the CCP has for a long time engaged in 'borrowing foreign newspapers', a strategy that involves building strong relationships with foreign journalists so that they write positive news stories about China (China Daily, 2017). To a large extent, it was this

<sup>3</sup>Our essay is based on our working paper, "Soft propaganda, misinformed citizens, and source credibility: A survey experiment on foreign native advertising" (Dai and Luqiu, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>Governments who engage in these types of activities tend to refer to them as *public diplomacy* to avoid the negative implications often associated with the word propaganda (Black, 2001; Zaharna, 2010). At the same time, they refer to these same activities by foreign governments as *international propaganda* (Misyuk, 2013).

strategy of ‘borrowing foreign newspapers’ that later evolved into foreign native advertising – the practice of directly placing paid news stories disguised as standard editorial content into foreign legacy newspapers and onto foreign-owned television and radio programs (Brady, 2015).

In our opinion, there are at least three significant differences between traditional forms of international propaganda and the relatively new practice of foreign native advertising. First, unlike traditional international broadcasting where governments sponsor and maintain broadcasting services in foreign languages and foreign countries, foreign native advertising uses foreign media outlets themselves as its platform. Compared to government-sponsored international broadcasting platforms, foreign legacy media outlets are likely to have much larger audiences and greater credibility among the local citizens.

Second, unlike much of the historical political advertising in foreign media, foreign native advertising attempts to imitate the objective journalism of the hosting media outlets. Like *commercial* native advertising, foreign native advertising appears as editorial content in an attempt to recreate the experience of reading objective news stories, and in doing so aims to deceive readers. Readers often have no idea that what they are reading is paid content from a foreign government (Ferrer Conill, 2016; Schauster, Ferrucci and Neill, 2016). In Figure 1, we show a paid supplement from the Chinese government that was placed under the World News section of the *Telegraph*, one of the most reputable media outlets in the United Kingdom. One of the goals of foreign native advertising is to deceive the audience into thinking that the content on the *China Watch* page is a standard part of the *Telegraph*’s World News section.

Third, foreign native advertising is a form of propaganda and advertising, and should not be considered the same as other types of third-party content. It is true that many news outlets use third-party content provided by organizations such as Reuters and Xinhua. However, news outlets must pay for the services and content provided by these third-party organizations. Moreover, they are also able to control the content of this material by selecting and editing the stories according to their own interests. In contrast, foreign native advertising involves domestic media outlets being *paid* to place content on their platforms by foreign governments *without*

the ability to select or edit that content. With foreign native advertising, the content that is published is chosen not because of its news value but because of the revenue that it generates.

### III. Understanding Foreign Native Advertising

Two parties must cooperate for foreign native advertising to occur. A foreign government must want to engage in foreign native advertising and a domestic media outlet must be willing to accept the advertising content. There are tradeoffs facing both the foreign government and the domestic media outlet.

**Control and credibility tradeoff.** Foreign governments face a tradeoff between control and credibility when it comes to the information environment. In most countries, the media is in a position to play an important role in holding governments accountable by providing information to the citizenry. A consequence of this is that governments have an incentive to try to influence how the media covers politics. Traditionally, governments and other political actors have attempted to influence media coverage through methods of direct control such as media ownership or through methods of indirect control such as sponsorship of, or subsidies to, media outlets. Even if they are technically independent, media outlets whose largest advertisers are political actors often demonstrate positive bias in their reporting towards these actors. For example, media outlets tend to provide less coverage to political scandals that involve their political sponsors (Di Tella and Franceschelli, 2011). Such direct and indirect control of the media comes with potential costs, though. The more control that political actors exert over the media and the more pro-government bias is exhibited by the media, the less likely citizens are to view the stories reported by the media as credible. This is important as we know that people pay less attention to media that they do not find credible (Johnson and Kaye, 1998), and that the content provided by credible media outlets is perceived as more persuasive (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Foreign native advertising shifts this control-credibility tradeoff in the government’s favor. In effect, foreign governments get to directly control the content of news reports while maximizing the credibility of these reports by mimicking standard editorial content and exploiting the good reputation of the hosting independent media.

**Revenue and credibility tradeoff.** While foreign gov-



Figure 1: A Screen-shot of the *China Watch* Page on *The Telegraph* in the United Kingdom

The Telegraph

HOME | NEWS | SPORT | BUSINESS | ALL SECTIONS

News | **World news**

China Watch Home | Business | Culture | Politics | Society | Sport | Technology | Travel

THIS CONTENT IS PRODUCED AND PUBLISHED BY CHINA DAILY, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, WHICH TAKES SOLE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ITS CONTENTS

## China Watch

Bringing you informative and diverse stories about contemporary China's dynamic development, including the latest news from the Technology, Business, Travel, Culture, Society and Sports sectors

### Business



**Hard facts on trade between China and the US spelt out**




**China seeks pacts on robotics**



**Foreign investors receive assurances**

China will continue proactively attracting foreign investment and safeguarding the legitimate interests of foreign-invested businesses as part of an effort to shore up the economy, the top leadership of the Communist Party of China decided on Wednesday.



**Jack Ma, Bill Gates to attend CIIE forum**

ernments face a tradeoff between control and credibility when it comes to the information environment, media outlets face a tradeoff between revenue and credibility. Media outlets value their credibility, but they also need reliable sources of revenue. Credibility and revenue are not necessarily in conflict. For example, we can imagine that credible media outlets might enjoy larger audiences, which, in turn, lead to higher revenues. However, the increasing ease with which individuals can obtain information from the Internet and social media means that individuals are less willing to pay for news than they were in the past. This development obviously threatens the revenue base of traditional media outlets such as newspapers (Kaye and Quinn, 2010). One way to generate additional revenue is to accept government sponsorship, subsidies, or advertisements. Accepting government support, though, especially financial support from foreign governments, is likely to damage the credibility and reputation of independent news media outlets. The expected costs of engaging in foreign native advertising depend on (1) the probability that one's au-

dience detects that the information being provided is an advertisement from a foreign government rather than a standard news story and (2) the magnitude of the negative impact on the hosting media site's credibility if the advertisement is detected. Although the potential costs to a media outlet's credibility are likely to be high if the foreign native advertising is detected, there are reasons to believe that the probability of detection is low due to the deceptive nature of foreign native advertising. Several studies have examined these issues in the context of *commercial* native advertising. For example, Wojdyski and Evans (2016) find that only 8% of respondents are able to identify a native advertising piece as sponsored as opposed to standard editorial content. Another study finds that 77% of respondents did not recognize native advertisements as advertising and that 54% of the respondents felt deceived by the native advertising when it was revealed to them (Contently, 2016). Domestic media outlets will accept foreign native advertising if they believe that the expected costs are low (because the probability of detection is small) relative to the revenue



benefits.

#### IV. An Experiment on Foreign Native Advertising

In what follows, we briefly discuss an online survey experiment we conducted to examine various aspects of foreign native advertising (Dai and Luqiu, 2018).

**Research design.** Respondents were asked to read a real *China Watch* article published by either the *Washington Post* or the *Telegraph*. Although the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* both have *China Watch* webpages with sponsored articles from the *China Daily*, the clarity of disclosure is quite different across the two media outlets. In the case of the *China Watch* webpage published by the *Telegraph*, there is no disclosure that the content is being *sponsored* or *advertised* by the *China Daily*. Instead, there is just a short statement in small font at the top of each article saying that “this content is produced and published by *China Daily*, People’s Republic of China, which takes sole responsibility for its content.” Nowhere is it indicated that the articles are advertisements paid for by the Chinese government. Although still confusing, the disclosure that accompanies the *China Watch* articles published by the *Washington Post* is more prominent. The label “advertisement” appears at the top of each article. At the bottom of each article is a statement indicating that “this content is paid for and provided by an advertiser, and the site is managed by [WP BrandStudio](#). The *Washington Post* newsroom and WP BrandStudio were not involved in the creation of this content.” There is no indication that the advertiser involved is the Chinese government.

Although it would be ideal to use the same *China Watch* article from the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* to avoid any ‘content effects’, this is not possible as *China Daily* intentionally avoids displaying identical articles in different media outlets. We therefore chose two similar articles that addressed the same topic — China’s plan to continue with market reforms. We chose economic/business news articles because these are the main types of news reports displayed on the *China Watch* sections of the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph*. After reading their *China Watch* article, respondents were asked several questions about the source and credibility of the information they saw.

Two control conditions were employed in the study. In each condition, the respondents read one of the two

available articles but on the original *China Daily* website instead of on the *China Watch* pages of the *Washington Post* or the *Telegraph*.

**Results and implications.** We now briefly summarize some of the empirical results from our experiment and discuss their implications. Were the respondents able to identify that the *China Daily* was the true source of the articles? Respondents who received the *China Watch* article from the *Washington Post*, which provides more disclosure information, are much more likely to correctly identify the true source of the article than respondents who received the *China Watch* article from the *Telegraph*. Significantly, a respondent’s ability to identify the true source of the article that they read was unrelated to their level of education or media literacy. Together these results challenge the common assumption that citizens, especially those with high levels of education, are able to detect government propaganda. This is particularly the case when source disclosure is unclear.

Does the credibility of the hosting media site go down when respondents are informed that the article they received is a paid advertisement from the government-controlled *China Daily*? To get at this question, we asked respondents to indicate their level of trust in the *Washington Post* or the *Telegraph* before receiving their *China Watch* article and after being informed about the true source of the article. As expected, the post-treatment level of trust in the hosting media outlet and the Chinese government are both significantly lower than the pre-treatment level of trust in these organizations. In addition, we find that the magnitude of the drop in trust in the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* increases with the level of trust respondents initially reported in these media outlets.

Are the *China Watch* articles that appear on the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* considered more persuasive than the same articles that appear on *China Daily*? To get at this question we asked respondents whether the article they read was unbiased, convincing, and told the whole story. As expected, we find that respondents consider the *China Watch* articles to be much more accurate, unbiased, and convincing than the same articles on the original *China Daily* platform, but only when they think the article is from the hosting media outlet. Our results here strongly support our argument that the effectiveness of foreign native advertising de-

depends on its deceptiveness. Our results also suggest that foreign native advertising can be much more effective than traditional forms of foreign propaganda based on international broadcasting or more conventional advertising practices.

## V. Conclusion

In this short essay, we have examined a new form of foreign propaganda, foreign native advertising, in which foreign governments buy space on independent media sites in other countries to publish state-sponsored content that mimics the standard editorial content found on the hosting media sites. While it might seem puzzling that an independent media outlet would risk its reputation by cooperating with the propaganda activities of a foreign government, we argue that the expected reputational cost to the hosting media outlet depends on both the likelihood of detection and the size of the decrease in its reputation if the propaganda is detected. Because of the deceptive nature of foreign native advertising, the expected costs associated with allowing this sort of advertising, relative to the revenue that is generated, is often quite low.

Using an online survey experiment, we find that respondents are unlikely to detect the true source of foreign native advertising, irrespective of their level of education and experience as a news consumer, unless the news story being reported is clearly disclosed as a paid advertisement. This finding challenges the view that citizens with high education are able to detect propaganda. Although respondents significantly lower their level of trust in the hosting media outlet after learning that a news story is a paid advertisement, the low likelihood that news consumers will detect the true source of the information means that the expected reputational costs of allowing foreign native advertising is low to the hosting media outlet. The deceptive nature of foreign native advertising makes it an effective tool for foreign governments to influence the citizenry of other countries. As we show in our results, the same message is perceived as much more persuasive when it comes in the form of foreign native advertising on an independent media outlet than when it comes in the form of news on a foreign state-controlled media site.

Given the persuasiveness of foreign native advertising and the obvious desire of foreign governments to influence the attitudes and behavior of citizens in other

countries, it is important to understand the strategy behind, and purposes of, such propaganda. In a future research project, we plan to investigate the purpose of foreign Chinese propaganda by examining the substantive content of its foreign native advertising. We plan to do this by using the original text data we have been collecting from the *Washington Post*, the *Telegraph*, and the *China Daily*.

Although our findings may seem troubling in that citizens are often unable to detect foreign native advertising and are likely to be influenced by such propaganda, our analysis also suggests one possible way to deter such propaganda. Much of the effectiveness of foreign native advertising and the size of the reputational costs accruing to the hosting media site depend on the deceptiveness of the advertising. This suggests that third parties who highlight and publicize the presence and use of foreign native advertising can reduce the effectiveness of such propaganda techniques and increase the reputational costs for domestic media outlets. This will hopefully reduce the incentives that foreign governments have to engage in these sorts of foreign propaganda activities and deter independent media outlets from cooperating with foreign agencies.

## References

- Archer, Allison M. and Joshua Clinton. 2018. "Changing owners, changing content: Does who owns the news matter for the news?" *Political Communication* 35(3):353–370.
- Barton, Ethan. 2015. "China, Russia pay *Washington Post* to publish their propaganda." *The Daily Caller*, October 29.
- Batsell, Jake. 2018. "4 steps to bring ethical clarity to native advertising." *Nieman Reports*, January 4.
- Black, Jay. 2001. "Semantics and ethics of propaganda." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 16(2-3):121–137.
- Brady, Anne-Marie. 2015. "China's foreign propaganda machine." *Journal of Democracy* 26(4):51–59.
- Carlson, Matt. 2015. "When news sites go native: Redefining the advertising–editorial divide in response to native advertising." *Journalism* 16(7):849–865.
- Cheng, Zhuqing, Guy J. Golan and Spiro Kioulos. 2016. "The second-level agenda-building function of the Xinhua news agency: Examining the role of government-sponsored news in mediated public diplomacy." *Journalism Practice* 10(6):744–762.
- China Daily. 2017. "An overview of *China Daily*."
- China Daily. 2018. "*China Daily's* global development."

- Contently. 2016. "Fixing native advertising: What consumers want from brands, publishers, and the FTC."
- Cook, Sarah. 2017. "Chinese government influence on the U.S. media landscape." Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on China's Information Controls, Global Media Influence, and Cyber Warfare Strategy, May 4.
- Dai, Yaoyao and Luwei Rose Luqiu. 2018. "Soft propaganda, misinformed citizens, and source credibility: A survey experiment on foreign political advertising." Unpublished manuscript, Pennsylvania State University.
- Di Tella, Rafael and Ignacio Franceschelli. 2011. "Government advertising and media coverage of corruption scandals." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 3(4):119–51.
- Edmonds, Rick. 2017. "Native advertising grows up fast, shedding its rogue image." *Poynter*, November 27.
- Edney, Kingsley. 2012. "Soft power and the Chinese propaganda system." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(78):899–914.
- Einstein, Mara. 2016. *Black Ops Advertising: Native Ads, Content Marketing and the Covert World of the Digital Sell*. New York: OR Books.
- Fallows, James. 2011. "Official Chinese propaganda: Now online from the WaPo!" *The Atlantic*, February 3.
- Ferrer Conill, Raul. 2016. "Camouflaging church as state: An exploratory study of journalism's native advertising." *Journalism Studies* 17(7):904–914.
- Gehlbach, Scott and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. "Government control of the media." *Journal of Public Economics* 118:163–171.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. "Propaganda as signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47(4):419–444.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2018. "The pathology of hard propaganda." *Journal of Politics* 80(3):1034–1038.
- Iversen, Magnus Hoem and Erik Knudsen. 2017. "When politicians go native: The consequences of political native advertising for citizens' trust in news." *Journalism*.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall et al. 2000. *Everything You Think You Know About Politics — And Why You're Wrong*. New York: Basic Books.
- Johnson, Thomas J. and Barbara K. Kaye. 1998. "Cruising is believing?: Comparing Internet and traditional sources on media credibility measures." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 75(2):325–340.
- Kaye, Jeff and Stephen Quinn. 2010. *Funding Journalism in the Digital Age: Business Models, Strategies, Issues and Trends*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kendrick, Alice and Jami A. Fullerton. 2004. "Advertising as public diplomacy: Attitude change among international audiences." *Journal of Advertising Research* 44(3):297–311.
- Krugler, David F. 2000. *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945–1953*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Little, Andrew T. 2017. "Propaganda and credulity." *Games and Economic Behavior* 102:224–232.
- Misyuk, Iryna. 2013. "Propaganda and public diplomacy: The problem of differentiation." Unpublished manuscript, Lviv Polytechnic National University.
- Mullin, Benjamin. 2017. "Vox Media pitches signature 'Explainer' format to advertisers." *Wall Street Journal*, October 13.
- Pornpitakpan, Chanthika. 2004. "The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 34(2):243–281.
- Rawnsley, Gary D. 2015. "To know us is to love us: Public diplomacy and international broadcasting in contemporary Russia and China." *Politics* 35(3–4):273–286.
- Schauster, Erin E., Patrick Ferrucci and Marlene S. Neill. 2016. "Native advertising is the new journalism: How deception affects social responsibility." *American Behavioral Scientist* 60(12):1408–1424.
- Washington Free Beacon. 2014. "WaPo still publishing Russian propaganda." September 3.
- Wojdyski, Bartosz W. and Nathaniel J. Evans. 2016. "Going native: Effects of disclosure position and language on the recognition and evaluation of online native advertising." *Journal of Advertising* 45(2):157–168.
- Zaharna, Rhonda S. 2010. *Battles to Bridges: US Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

## The Relationship between State and Corporate Censorship

by Anita R. Gohdes  
University of Zurich

In the fall of 2018, the 20 most frequently accessed websites worldwide almost exclusively included search engines, such as Google, Baidu, and Yandex, and social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo.<sup>1</sup> As more people are connecting to the world wide web across the globe, more users are spending longer hours on a smaller number of websites. In countries that have only recently experienced rising levels of digitalization, many users access the Internet through zero-rated services, such as Facebook's Free Basics, that allow them to surf a small set of websites (including a lightweight version of Facebook) for free while having to pay for further access ([Global Voices](#)

<sup>1</sup> An exception is Wikipedia, which is ranked fifth, according to [Alexa](#).

Netizen Report Team, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that Facebook has become synonymous with the Internet in some parts of the world (Mirani, 2015).

The increasing amount of time spent on just a small set of websites is indicative of the increasing centralization of digital content on the Internet, and the rising power of a small number of technology companies. Governments intent on blocking access to certain content are finding themselves confronted with shifting challenges. One of these challenges includes having to negotiate terms and regulations with these tech giants. In some cases, these companies are partially or even fully controlled by state interests, allowing governments to continuously develop their censorship methods to match the changing modes of Internet usage. Scholars researching digital censorship in China have expertly demonstrated this trend (Roberts, 2018; MacKinnon, 2011; Xu, Mao and Halderman, 2011). Many countries, however, lack the capacity to build their own functioning Internet ecosystem. As a result, most of the popular content sharing platforms used by citizens in repressive states tends to be controlled by foreign companies.<sup>2</sup>

### *I. Government Censorship*

Governments all across the world use a variety of tools to block access to specific websites that have been classified as threatening (Deibert et al., 2008, 2010). Figure 1 shows Internet censorship efforts by governments in 2017, where “censorship attempts include Internet filtering (blocking access to certain websites or browsers), denial-of-service attacks, and partial or total Internet shutdowns” (Coppedge et al., 2018, 181). Some countries maintain so-called ‘blocklists’ that are given to Internet service providers to block user requests to websites specified on the lists. In Russia, the government set up a blocklist in 2012, and has since then added thousands of banned websites to this list.<sup>3</sup> Cyberattacks aimed against websites’ servers (for example, through denial of service attacks) can take down websites for certain periods of time while allowing state actors to deny involvement (Zuckerman et al., 2010). For exam-

ple, Burmese activists have been confronted with a wide range of cyberattacks for the past decade, many of which are “consistent with government and military interest in information control and censorship” (Villeneuve and Crete-Nishihata, 2011, 235).

Censorship methods such as blocking websites or ordering cyberattacks are generally assumed to work effectively when targeted websites provide fringe content — content that is not necessarily in high demand with a large part of the population — and when the techniques chosen to block access are reasonably reliable. The centralization of content on certain websites poses a risk to both of these conditions. First, censoring popular platforms is a lot harder than censoring the websites of individual groups. If activists mostly publish their information on personal websites, the majority of a country may not be particularly concerned if access to that website is blocked. But when such content is distributed via highly popular platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, shutting down access to said websites can quickly provoke national outrage, as was the case when Twitter and Facebook were briefly blocked in Egypt in 2011 (Arthur, 2011). When activists therefore rely on platforms built for mass communication — such as mainstream social media sites — they ultimately make it harder for governments to censor them without alarming the broader population (Zuckerman, 2015). While the rising importance of platforms used by the majority of a country’s population means that shutting down one or two popular services can effectively remove access for large parts of the population, many governments have experienced how such blocks can backfire and provoke protest and unrest from previously ‘unpolitical’ citizens.

Second, in relying on the infrastructure of large companies, activists and other opposition groups find themselves less vulnerable to conventional cyberattacks.<sup>4</sup> Larger social media platforms employ their own cybersecurity teams and usually pay for extensive security measures to protect their servers from such attacks. While there have been attempts in recent years that have managed to successfully attack the servers of larger on-

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent overview of corporate ethics and decision-making in the context of government-requested Internet filtering, see Zittrain and Palfrey (2008).

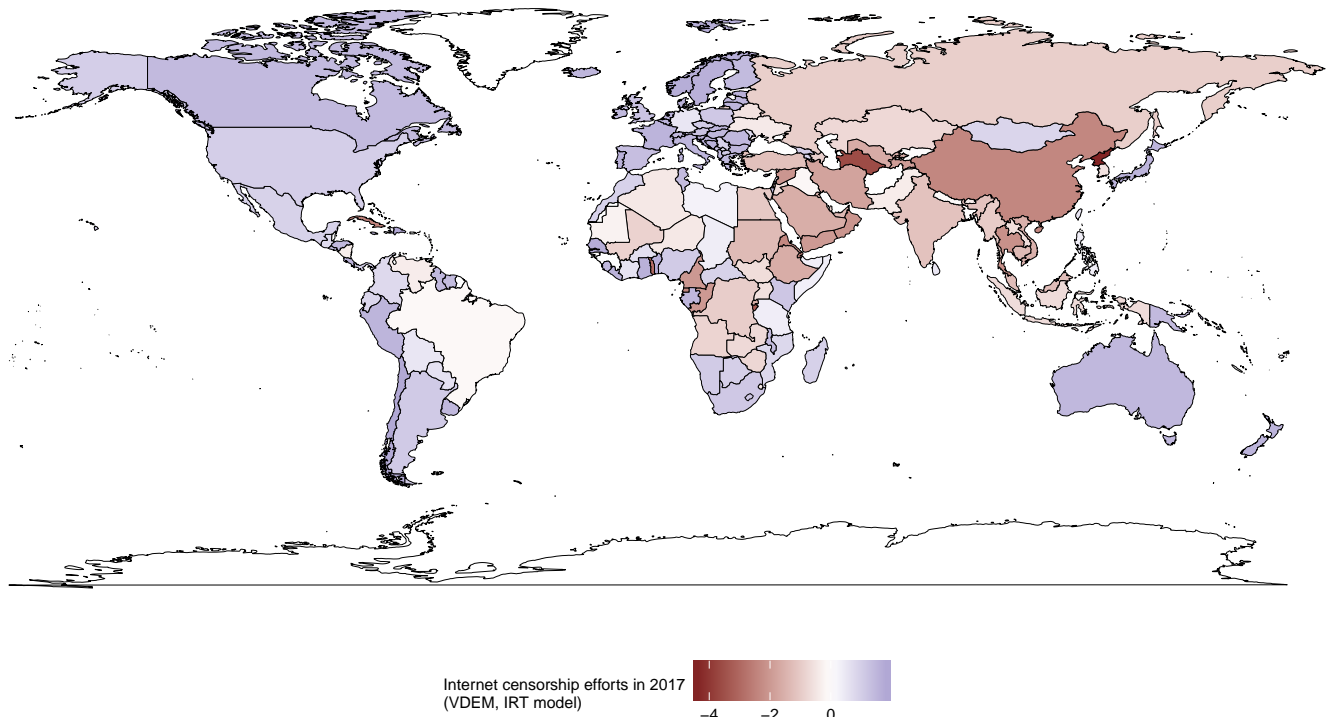
<sup>3</sup>Digital activists have been collecting a list of the banned websites at <https://reestr.rublacklist.net/>.

<sup>4</sup>Cyberattacks against the websites of activists and independent media outlets nevertheless continue to occur all over the world, even if many groups are now less vulnerable than they used to be. The continuously high number of attacks indicates that censorship may not be the only rationale for these attacks.

<sup>5</sup>In relying on the ‘protection’ of large social media platforms, activists are, however, frequently subjected to issues related to the companies’ own regulatory agendas. Community guidelines, as well as platform-specific rules and regulations, frequently target minorities and



Figure 1: Internet Censorship Efforts in 2017



line platforms, they are usually mitigated within a short period of time.<sup>5</sup> Effectively and reliably censoring content through the use of cyberattacks has therefore become increasingly challenging for governments.

Repressive states now face the choice of shutting down access to entire websites, thereby potentially antagonizing their own support base, or granting access to it, thereby potentially allowing opposition groups to increase their public support.<sup>6</sup> Technology companies on the other hand have a strong incentive to increase their user base in as many countries as possible, which means that country-wide shutdowns should be avoided at all costs. Against rising pressure from governments across the world, including the pressure of democratic governments legally demanding the removal of content that violates domestic law,<sup>7</sup> many social media companies have put in place systems to deal with content removal requests.

## II. States versus Twitter

The micro-blogging platform Twitter has published limited information about the types of removal requests they receive by governments since 2012. The company reports the number of legal demands directed at content (or active accounts) posted on Twitter in six-month intervals.<sup>8</sup> Starting in December 2017, the company, following its 'Country Withheld Content Policy', now informs users when a tweet is withheld in a certain country due to local laws or other legal demands (Kessel, 2017). Twitter may also withhold entire accounts in response to legal demands. The data is available for download and distinguishes between requests that are based on court orders and requests that are based on other legal demands brought forward by specific government agencies or the police.<sup>9</sup> Together with the received removal requests, it also publishes the percentage of requests where at least some content was subsequently

may lead to content being deleted or hidden without any government involvement (York, 2017a,b).

<sup>5</sup> Another strategy used by governments is to overwhelm platforms with pro-government messages (Roberts, 2018; Gunitsky, 2015)

<sup>7</sup> Examples of this include hate speech laws in both Germany and France.

<sup>8</sup> It has also recently started to report requests to remove or withhold content or accounts to Lumen, a platform created by the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard to study requests to remove content from the web.

<sup>9</sup> See Twitter's report on removal requests at <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html>.

withheld by the company.

In what follows, I present a short descriptive analysis of government-requested removals and Twitter's subsequent compliance with said requests. Analyzing both the number of requests and the company's willingness to comply offers a first insight into the complex and evolving tension between the censorship ambitions of governments and the risk calculations of tech companies.

### III. Removal Requests

In Figure 2, I plot the number of removal requests for the countries with the most removal requests between 2012 and 2017.<sup>10</sup> Following Twitter's bi-annual reporting, the requests are presented for six-month intervals. The top left panel shows the overall trend for this time period. Between 2012 and 2014 few countries made requests to remove content. The number of requests then jumps from roughly 1,000 overall requests at the beginning of 2015 to over 6,400 removal requests at the end of the same year. While the number of court orders slightly increases in 2016 (from 486 at the end of 2015 to 761 in the first half of 2016, and 894 in the second half), the rise in removal requests is mostly due to the almost ten-fold growth in other types of legal demands. Looking at the most frequent requesting countries, we see that this increase is mostly due to rising requests coming from Turkey and Russia. In 2017 alone, over 2,500 removal requests were filed by agencies of the Russian government, and Twitter complied with removing at least some content in over 50% of these cases.

### IV. Compliance

In Figure 3, I show the level of compliance displayed by the company for the same subset of countries. Compliance with removal requests varies substantially both across countries and within countries over time. This variation indicates that the process of complying with requests involves some assessment of both the *type* of request made and the possible *repercussions* that the company expects to face if it rejects a request. Twitter fails to comply with all legal demands brought forward by the governments of Indonesia, the United States, and South Korea, and only complies with a very small percentage of requests made by the United Kingdom. For requests made by Japan, France, India, and Germany, compli-

ance seems to be, albeit weakly, inversely correlated with the number of requests issued: the more content that governments request be removed, the less Twitter seems to comply with the requests. In the case of Russian requests, the pattern looks quite different. Even though the number of takedown requests has dramatically increased in the past few years, Twitter has frequently complied with almost half of those requests. Overall Twitter displays some of the highest levels of compliance both in relative and absolute terms to requests issued by Russian government agencies.

While the rising importance of platforms used by the majority of a country's population means that shutting down one or two popular services can effectively remove access for large parts of the population, many governments have experienced how such blocks can backfire and provoke protest and unrest from previously 'unpolitical' citizens.

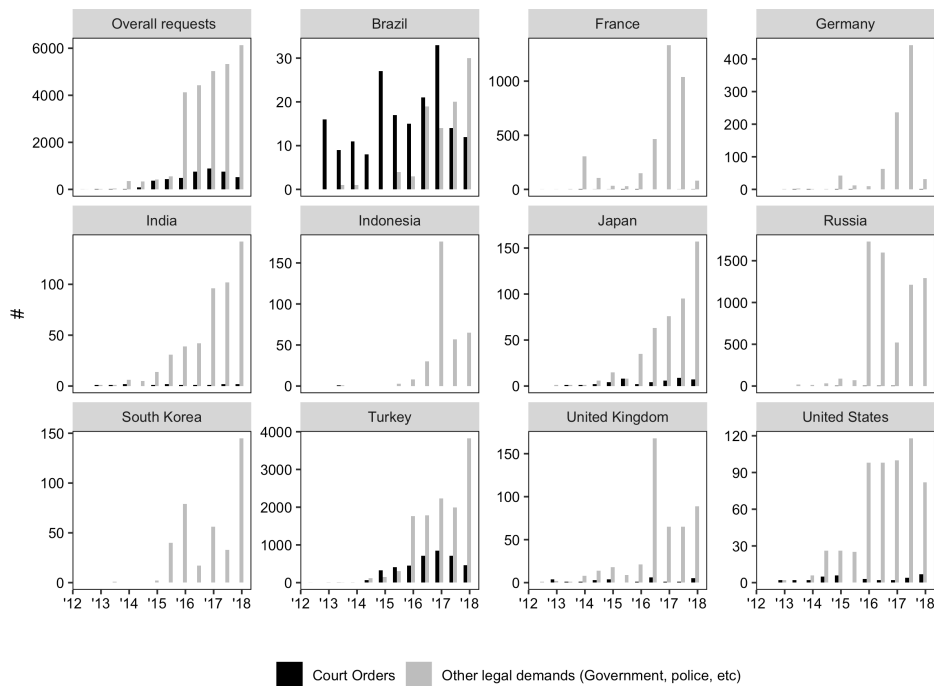
The Turkish government's relationship with social media platforms is an instructive case to study the intricate relationship between corporate and state interests. Turkey's citizens are extremely active on social media, and Twitter in particular enjoys high popularity, not just from voices critical of the government, but also from Erdogan supporters (Dogramaci and Radcliffe, 2015). Studies of the Gezi Park protests that dominated Turkish politics in 2013 have repeatedly indicated the key role that social media played in light of the high levels of traditional media censorship (Barberá et al., 2015). And as Zeynep Tufekci writes,

Twitter is not just a protest tool in Turkey, nor just a place where the growing corruption scandal [in 2014 was] discussed. It's also used by large numbers of government supporters, including almost all of the leading officials and parliamentarians from the ruling party. It's an entrenched part of the networked public sphere (Tufekci, 2014).

In February 2014, the Turkish government introduced far-reaching amendments to an existing Internet

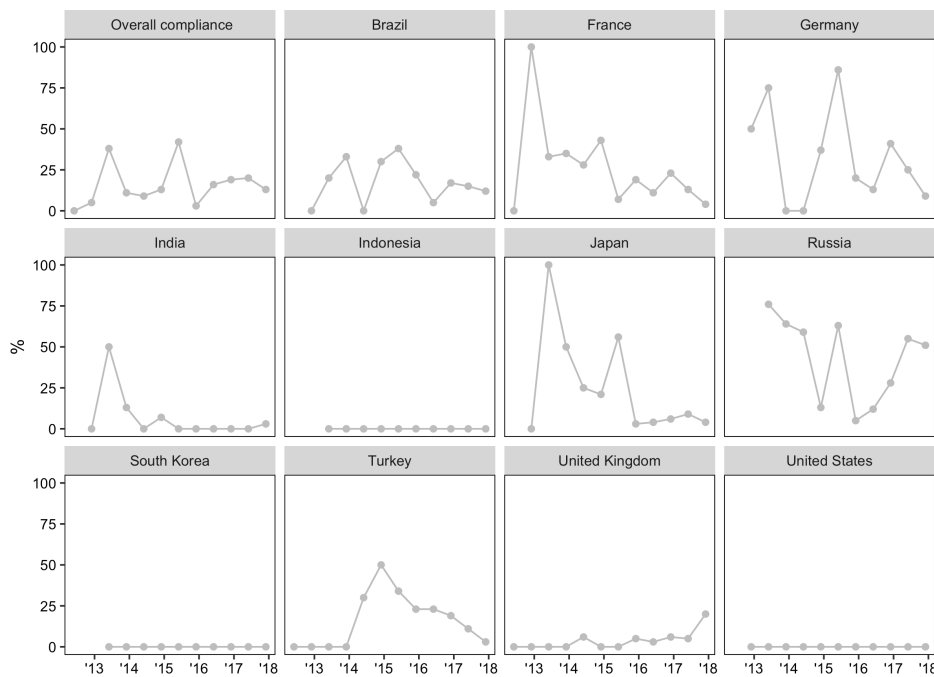
<sup>10</sup>The graph includes ten countries with the most legal removal requests, as well as Brazil, which has few overall requests but the second highest number of court-ordered removals.

Figure 2: Twitter Removal Requests from the Most Active Countries, 2012-2018



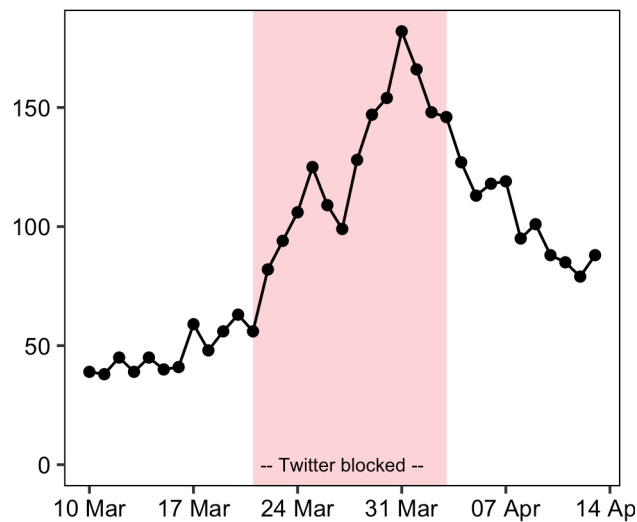
Note: Figure 2 plots the number of removal requests made to Twitter by the ten countries (and Brazil) with the most legal removal requests.

Figure 3: Compliance with Removal Requests from the Most Active Countries, 2012-2018



Note: Figure 3 plots the percentage of removal requests made to Twitter that are complied with for the ten countries (and Brazil) with the most legal removal requests.

Figure 4: Daily Tor Users in Turkey, 2014



Note: Figure 4 shows the change in the daily number of Tor users in Turkey after a court order was issued to completely block Twitter in 2014. The number of Tor users is calculated as the estimated number of clients connecting to Twitter via bridges.

law that would essentially allow the government to request the blocking of websites without obtaining a court order (Freedom House, 2014). One month later, against the backdrop of massive protests (Arsu, 2014), a court order was issued to block Twitter completely after the company failed to respond to the government's requests to remove certain accounts. Given the large number of active Twitter users in Turkey, the company was quick to condemn the shutdown of their site (Gadde, 2014).

Following the shutdown, the number of people using circumvention tools to access Twitter from within Turkey increased massively. Figure 4 shows how the estimated daily number of Tor users increased in the days following the Twitter ban.<sup>11</sup> The numbers reported here are quite small, but are indicative of the fact that the proportion of Turkish Internet users who accessed some type of circumvention tool increased rapidly in response to the shutdown.

At the beginning of April, the court order was overruled, and the following day Twitter was unblocked in Turkey. Following this brief episode of extreme blocking and the subsequent popular outrage, the Turkish government started making more extensive use of the platform's 'country withheld content' option. The requests start out quite sparingly in the first half of 2014 with a mere 186 requests, but by the second half of 2014

the number has already risen to 500. In 2015 the number further increases, going from 718 in the first half of the year, to 2, 211 by the end of December.

Twitter's compliance pattern changed considerably throughout this time. After the company failed to remove content prior to being shut down in Turkey in March 2014, it complied with about half of all requests by the end of 2014. However, with massively increasing demands by the Turkish government starting in 2015, the company slowly moved towards noncompliance, essentially ignoring the government's requests by the end of 2017. Starting at 34% in 2015, compliance falls all the way to 3% in 2017. While these numbers merely describe the company's level of compliance, the patterns we see here are compatible with a development whereby the company decided to show goodwill and cooperate with the government's takedown requests in the aftermath of being banned, but then over time weighed the benefits of compliance with the Turkish government's preferences against its international image as a purveyor of freedom of expression. The company may also have calculated a diminishing risk of being fully shut down again.

The massive backlash in 2014 may have contributed to the fact that the Turkish government has been fairly restrained in its use of full shutdowns of Twitter since

<sup>11</sup>Tor software allows users to surf the Internet anonymously, thereby circumventing blocks directed at users in certain locations.



then. For governments intent on blocking access to specific content on large social media platforms, requesting specific content to be removed may be more effective than shutting it down entirely. Fewer people are likely to resort to circumvention tools when confronted with selective censorship than when confronted with indiscriminate censorship (Hobbs and Roberts, 2018). However, the large volume of requests submitted by the Turkish government to Twitter demonstrates the tension that exists between the company's corporate interests and the government's censorship ambitions.

Overall the Turkish government's ambitions to censor the Internet seem to have increased. In 2017, the government started to block access to Wikipedia following the introduction of a new law that allows censorship of content deemed to be obscene or a threat to national security (Farid, 2017). Furthermore, according to journalists, throttling — slowing access to — the Internet has become a new popular strategy to keep critical voices, such as those of journalists or activists, from using the Internet for their work (Rios Yaguez, 2017).

With the increasing ambitions of governments to censor and regulate online content, and the increasing power concentrated in the hands of a few technology companies, investigating the tensions and balancing act that characterize the relationship between corporate and state interests will become vital for our understanding of censorship and control of the Internet.

## References

- Arsu, Sebnem. 2014. "Across Turkey, new unrest as teenage boy is buried." *New York Times*, March 12.
- Arthur, Charles. 2011. "Egypt blocks social media websites in attempted clampdown on unrest." *Guardian*, January 26.
- Barberá, Pablo, Ning Wang, Richard Bonneau, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua Tucker and Sandra González-Bailón. 2015. "The critical periphery in the growth of social protests." *PLOS ONE* 10(11):1–15.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish et al. 2018. "V-Dem Codebook v8".
- Deibert, Ronald, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan Zittrain and Janice Gross Stein. 2008. *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Deibert, Ronald, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan Zittrain and Miklos Haraszti. 2010. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Dogramaci, Esra and Damian Radcliffe. 2015. "How Turkey uses social media." Digital News Report.
- Farid, Farid. 2017. "Turkey has blocked Wikipedia and is censoring Twitter." *Motherboard*, April 29.
- Freedom House. 2014. "Freedom on the Net 2014."
- Gadde, Vijaya. 2014. "Challenging the access ban in Turkey." Twitter, March 26.
- Global Voices Netizen Report Team. 2016. "Netizen report: Facebook's 'Free Basics' app is under fire in India, offline in Egypt." January 8.
- Gunitsky, Seva. 2015. "Corrupting the cyber-commons: Social media as a tool of autocratic stability." *Perspectives on Politics* 13:42–54.
- Hobbs, William R. and Margaret E. Roberts. 2018. "How sudden censorship can increase access to information." *American Political Science Review* 112(3):621–636.
- Kessel, Jeremy. 2017. "Increased transparency on country withheld content." Twitter, December 20.
- MacKinnon, Rebecca. 2011. "China's networked authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 22(2):32–46.
- Mirani, Leo. 2015. "Millions of Facebook users have no idea they're using the internet." February 9.
- Rios Yaguez, Beatriz. 2017. "How throttling internet has become a way of censorship in Turkey." April 9.
- Roberts, Margaret E. 2018. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. 2014. "The day the Turkish government banned itself from Twitter." April 2.
- Villeneuve, Nart and Masashi Crete-Nishihata. 2011. Control and resistance: Attacks on Burmese opposition media. In *Access Contested: Security, Identity, and Resistance in Asian Cyberspace*. Cambridge: MIT Press pp. 233–268.
- Xu, Xueyang, Z. Morley Mao and J. Alex Halderman. 2011. Internet censorship in China: Where does the filtering occur? In *Passive and Active Measurement*, ed. N. Spring and G. Riley. Springer pp. 133–142.
- York, Jillian. 2017a. "Twitter suspensions reveal the company's skewed views of 'extremism'." *Motherboard*, April 3.
- York, Jillian. 2017b. "Facebook celebrates pride, except where homosexuality is illegal." *Motherboard*, June 20.
- Zittrain, Jonathan and John Palfrey. 2008. Reluctant gatekeepers: Corporate ethics on a filtered Internet. In *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering*, ed. Ronald J. Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski and Jonathan Zittrain. Cambridge: MIT Press pp. 103–122.
- Zuckerman, Ethan. 2015. Cute cats to the rescue? Participatory media and political expression. In *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, ed. Danielle Allen and Jennifer Light. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zuckerman, Ethan, Hal Roberts, Ryan McGrady, Jillian York and John Palfrey. 2010. “Distributed denial of service attacks against independent media and human rights sites.” Working Paper, The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

## Informational and Non-Informational Propaganda

by Carlo M. Horz

Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse

Politicians frequently use propaganda to “shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2015). Moreover, scholars have demonstrated that propagandistic communications can be highly effective in shaping beliefs and behavior, from voting (Peisakhin and Rozenas, Forthcoming; Adena et al., 2015) and political attitudes (Cantoni et al., 2017; DellaVigna et al., 2014; Bleck and Michelitch, 2017; Huang, 2018; Kern and Hainmueller, 2009) to participation in conflict, including ethnic riots (Brass, 1997; Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Horowitz, 1985) and genocides (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014; Prunier, 1995). These communications may be lies, such as stating inflation is low when it is, in fact, high. Or they may consist of evidence-free speculations that are difficult to falsify, information-less interpretations of, or ‘spins’ on, factual events, or entirely subjective and thus unfalsifiable assertions. Examples of the latter might include claims that a current event proves that the whole political class is corrupt, that the future will be bright if a particular policy is implemented, or that a particular ethnic identity requires an antagonistic attitude towards another ethnic group.

While the effectiveness of propaganda is well documented, the political, social, economic, and informational conditions under which different *types* of propaganda are or are not effective, and how exactly each type is effective, remain open questions.<sup>1</sup> These questions are difficult to answer empirically for several reasons. First, in practice, propaganda tends to consist of some mix of lies, appeals to group identity, and evidence-free speculations, making it difficult to disentangle how each kind of statement contributes to propaganda’s overall effect

on behavior. This task is further complicated by the fact that the relative effectiveness of each type of propaganda may be determined by some combination of a number of background conditions such as a country’s current economic climate, ethnic composition, and so on. Additionally, the interaction between a propagandist and her audience is strategic: a propagandist presumably shapes her communications anticipating her audience’s reaction, and her audience is likely aware of her motives.

These difficulties make game-theoretic analysis a useful tool. By allowing researchers to examine each type of propaganda in isolation, hold constant some background conditions while varying others, and analyze the strategic interaction between propagandist and audience, formal models of propaganda can help to identify the mechanisms by which, and conditions under which, different propagandistic communications motivate behavior (Myerson, 1992). To date, however, most game-theoretic analyses have focused on one particular kind of propagandistic communication: factually false statements, or lies (Guriev and Treisman, 2015; Little, 2017; Huang, 2015; Chen and Xu, 2017; Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Edmond, 2013). In the rest of this essay, I describe this approach to studying propaganda, then discuss some ways in which it has been expanded to encompass other types of propagandistic communication and what can be learned from these expanded models about the conditions under which group-identity-based propaganda and evidence-free assertions are effective.

### *I. Theorizing Informational Propaganda*

It is useful to begin with a short description of game-theoretic models of communication (Crawford and Sobel, 1982; Kamenica and Gentzkow, 2011).<sup>2</sup> In these models, there is a message sender (the propagandist), one or more receivers (the audience), a state of the world (the inflation rate, regime popularity, and so on), and a message about the state of the world. The sender chooses to send one of several messages, and may or may not know the state when making her choice.<sup>3</sup> Because a knowable, true state of the world exists, the sender’s message is propagandistic if it does not equal the state, meaning that a propagandistic message conveys, at minimum, factually false information; if the

<sup>1</sup> See Little (2018) for an argument that fake news should have limited power in democracies.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed review of these models, see Sobel (2013).

<sup>3</sup> More generally, the sender chooses some probability distribution over messages conditional on a state of the world, for all states.

sender knows the state of the world, the message conveys a lie. The receiver does not know the state *ex ante* — but has some prior belief about it — and forms a posterior belief after receiving the message, usually using Bayes' rule and taking the sender's incentives and strategy (lying, inflating a signal, and so on) into account. His posterior belief may be more or less accurate than his prior belief.

This highly flexible framework forms the bedrock of a number of important recent contributions to the study of propaganda (Little, 2017; Huang, 2015; Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Edmond, 2013; Chen and Xu, 2017; Guriev and Treisman, 2015). However, it has some limitations. First, although the framework could theoretically be used to model propagandistic claims about anything for which an objective truth exists — including evidence-free speculations or interpretations of highly complex events — the learning process it assumes among receivers (which requires that receivers know the universe of possible states of the world *ex ante* and understand the relationship between each state and the message they see) seems most plausible when applied to propaganda concerning relatively simple facts (Callander, 2008). Second, this way of modeling propaganda does not consider the role of rhetoric as separate from content: only the content of a statement matters, and any permutation of the language (signal) used by the propagandist to convey the content yields an equivalent equilibrium (Sobel, 2013). Third, some types of propagandistic statements, such as subjective claims about the content of a group identity (taking group identities as constructed) or the value of a worldview, have no relationship to a true state of the world at all.

## II. Theorizing Non-Informational Propaganda

Scholars have recently attempted to address some of these limitations. Some remain within the standard Bayesian framework described above, but try to speak to identity-related notions such as 'enemies' and 'out-groups' by defining the state of the world in ways more conducive to these interpretations. For example, Baliga and Sjöström (2012) analyze an incomplete-information conflict game in which some types of player are more or less 'aggressive'; that is, likely to start a conflict independent of their opponent's move. The propagandist knows one player's type and communicates about it to the player's opponent, thus affecting the probability of conflict. In Glaeser (2005), a minor-

ity group can be hostile or friendly, and a propagandist attempts to persuade the majority that the minority is hostile.

Others are similarly faithful to the principles of Bayesian learning but introduce substantial complexity to the state space in order to model how individuals might make (Bayesian) inferences about highly complex processes. Thus, Shapiro (2016) supposes two correlated states of the world: in the first, climate change is real or not; in the second, some observable fact provides support for the (non-)existence of climate change or is ambiguous. Potentially biased journalists can selectively report on the second state of the world.

While the effectiveness of propaganda is well documented, the political, social, economic, and informational conditions under which different types of propaganda are or are not effective, and how exactly each type is effective, remain open questions.

A third collection of scholars relax standard Bayesian assumptions, usually by simply letting the propagandist choose a certain feature in the receiver's utility function. This is done in different ways. In Dickson and Scheve (2006), electoral candidates can choose to make group identity salient using 'group speech'; if they do, their speech enters the voters' utility function directly and is assumed to make all voters more likely to vote for a coethnic. In Perez-Oviedo (2015), a dictator may choose citizens' prior beliefs, which affects their calculations about whether to revolt. Finally, Mukand and Rodrik (2016) combine these features by allowing an entrepreneur to produce different kinds of 'memes' that are assumed to change either a voter's beliefs or his identity.

In recent work, I contribute to this research agenda by studying the conditions under which subjective claims about group identity and information-free interpretations or rhetoric can change listeners' beliefs and actions. Specifically, in one project, I model endogenous group identity in order to understand the conditions under which propaganda about group identities in particular is more or less effective (Horz, 2017). In another, I construct a game-theoretic model to understand how, and when, information-free, propagandis-

tic rhetoric or speculation can alter audience behavior (Horz, 2018).

### III. Identity Propaganda

There is substantial empirical evidence that political entrepreneurs can use propagandistic statements about individuals' group identities to change their behavior (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014; Bleck and Michelitch, 2017; Mukand and Blouin, Forthcoming). However, it has proved difficult for empirical studies to identify the mechanism by which, or conditions under which, such propaganda is effective. This suggests an important role for theoretical work. But while in recent years the general insight that social identities are important explanatory concepts (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) has been incorporated into formal models (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Shayo, 2009), with some applications in political science (Penn, 2008; Landa and Duell, 2015; Schnakenberg, 2014), it has only rarely been applied to the study of propaganda (Dickson and Scheve, 2006).

To contribute to understanding when, and how, identity propaganda might affect behavior, I build a game-theoretic model of an interaction between a propagandist and two receivers, one of whom (the 'target') shares the propagandist's group identity (Horz, 2017). I show that one mechanism by which identity propaganda may be effective is by allowing the co-group target to commit credibly to changing his behavior in a way that improves his utility, and derive some conditions under which identity propaganda can motivate its target to adopt negative (positive) attitudes towards other groups. I describe the model and results in more detail below.

The model has two stages. First, the propagandist proposes a new set of identity attitudes to the target. Both receivers observe the proposal, and the target chooses whether to act according to the new attitudes or his pre-existing attitudes. Next, the target and other-group member both exert effort to achieve some outcome, in a cooperative (if they wish to achieve the same outcome, such as state-building) or conflictual (if they wish to achieve opposite outcomes) way. All three players care materially about the outcome. The receivers may also care about their social identities. If so, they are modeled as having social preferences: others' welfare enters into their utility (Chen and Li, 2009; Benjamin, Choi and Strickland, 2010). Then their utilities depend

on (1) their own effort and that of others and (2) an identity parameter that describes their feelings towards their own and the other group — for example, if a player feels spite towards the other group, an increase in their utility decreases his utility. Thus, the target's utility can be described by  $U(e, \tau)$ , where  $e$  represents his own effort and the other group's effort and  $\tau$  represents how he feels about each group.

Given some vector of pre-existing attitudes  $\tau_0$ , how can a propagandist persuade a target to change his behavior using identity propaganda  $\tau_1$ ? One answer could be that such propaganda directly affects the target's preferences by altering his identity, as in Dickson and Scheve (2006) and Mukand and Rodrik (2016). But such an approach *assumes* the effectiveness of propaganda, rather than explaining it. In addition, such automatic effectiveness seems most plausible for very long-term propaganda campaigns such as those implemented through school curricula.

I propose an alternative approach: because the target's identity affects his effort via his social preferences, accepting identity propaganda would credibly commit him to altering his effort, which would motivate the other group member to alter *his* effort choice. Consequently, there is a different effort equilibrium associated with the propagandist's identity proposal, call it  $e(\tau_1)$ . If the other group member's new effort choice would benefit the target — that is, he would put less (more) effort into fighting (cooperating) with the target — the target has an incentive to *behave as if* he accepts the identity propaganda, even though his fundamental identity attitudes  $\tau_0$  have not changed. Formally, the target will do this if

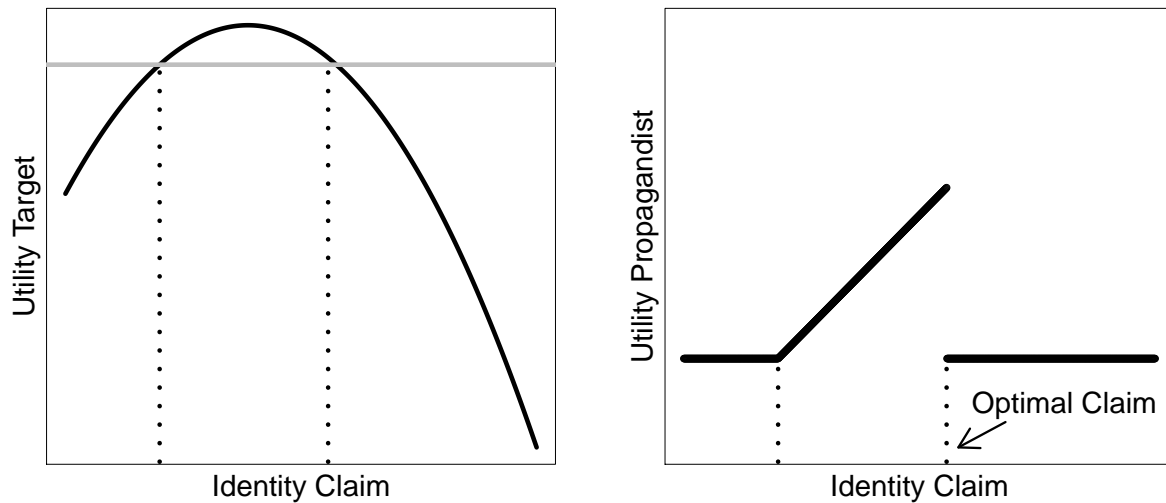
$$U(e(\tau_1), \tau_0) \geq U(e(\tau_0), \tau_0). \quad (1)$$

Figure 1 illustrates this constraint and its implications for the propagandist's utility in a situation where the propagandist wishes to increase the target's effort. The left panel shows the target's utility from exerting effort in accordance with his current attitudes (the grey line) and from changing his behavior in response to identity propaganda (the black curve): the target will only respond to propaganda that falls into the interval depicted by the dotted lines. The right panel shows the propagandist's utility given this constraint; notice that it is optimal for her to choose the most extreme claim that is accepted by the target.

This equilibrium result has two important implica-



Figure 1: Group Member Utility and a Propagandist's Utility



tions. First, identity propaganda only works if it motivates behavior by both receivers that leaves its target at least as well off as he is given his current attitudes. Second, and relatedly, not merely the presence of an other-group but its awareness of the propagandist's message is crucial to identity propaganda's effectiveness. This suggests that the broader the platform for airing identity propaganda, the more effective it can be.

Further analysis provides insight into the substantive conditions under which the target will act in accordance with specific kinds of identity propaganda. In a cooperative environment where the receivers' efforts are complements, the target will accept propaganda encouraging greater altruism towards both groups; if their efforts are substitutes, the target prefers propaganda encouraging *less* altruism towards *both* groups because these attitudes credibly commit him to exerting less effort, motivating the other group to increase effort and allowing the target to free-ride. In conflict situations, by contrast, acceptable identity propaganda depends on the balance of power between the groups. If the target's group is sufficiently strong, the target has an incentive to commit to more spiteful out-group attitudes to, effectively, frighten the other group out of fighting back. If the target's group is weak, he prefers to commit to more altruistic out-group attitudes to deter the other group from attacking it.

#### IV. Spin, Rhetoric, and Unsubstantiated Assertions

News outlets (and laypersons) often describe politicians' statements as 'speculations', or 'unsubstantiated assertions', or as using rhetoric to 'spin' some factual event. These descriptions suggest that the statement in question either had no informational content or did contain information but described it in a way that affected its meaning without conveying additional information. Both interpretations present a challenge to many game-theoretic models of communication. Because in the standard Bayesian framework only the information in speech is relevant, the existence of uninformative speech is difficult to explain. Citizens should ignore uninformative statements — but then why are they uttered?<sup>4</sup>

To understand the conditions under which such statements might affect citizen behavior, I construct a model of uninformative speech in which I deviate from the standard Bayesian framework by incorporating intuitions from psychological research about the costs associated with critical thinking (Horz, 2018). Psychologists have argued that because critically evaluating information is costly, individuals sometimes accept information at face value to save effort (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Kahneman, 2011). I incorporate this argument into an optimization framework by assuming that individuals choose the level of cognitive effort that

<sup>4</sup>It is unsatisfying to argue that if a statement is made, citizens must be able to infer useful information from it somehow because otherwise it would not be made.

yields the highest payoff, and show that when citizens choose how critically to assess rhetoric or unsubstantiated assertions, such communications can affect behavior. However, the further uninformative propaganda veers from whatever information about the state of the world is available to its audience, the higher the stakes for the audience of wrongly believing such propaganda, and the more cognitive effort it exerts — constraining the propagandist. The political environment can affect the size of these constraints; for example, during a crisis, knowing the true state of the world is more important for citizens' welfare, so critical thinking becomes more profitable. I describe the model and results in more detail below.

In the model there is a propagandist, a receiver, and a state of the world. The citizen receives a (binary) signal which includes information about the state of the world and (non-informational) rhetoric. In a standard communications model, the information provided about the state of the world would be endogenous; to focus on uninformative speech, I treat it as fixed and instead endogenize rhetoric. The signal can thus be interpreted in several ways: its informational content could represent some exogenous event and its rhetoric the propagandist's attempt to shape the citizen's understanding of the event using speculation or unsubstantiated assertions; or its information might represent some truth in the propagandist's statement and its rhetoric the propagandist's attempt to 'spin' that truth. Rhetoric matters because if the citizen is completely uncritical, it directly determines his beliefs and behavior. The more effort the citizen exerts to think critically, the more likely he is to disregard rhetoric and reach the correct (Bayesian) conclusion about the state of the world given the information in the signal.

I show that the receiver's optimal cognitive effort increases in the distance between information and rhetoric in the signal. Because the more extreme the rhetoric, the more suspicious (critical) the citizen becomes, the propagandist must trade off between increasing rhetoric's behavioral effects if it is believed and decreasing its believability. In equilibrium, this results in rhetoric that exaggerates the informational content.

Since propaganda's effectiveness is often thought to depend on the political environment, I also examine how two specific environmental features — authoritarian repression and crisis — influence rhetoric's ef-

fectiveness in equilibrium by changing citizens' incentives to think critically. With respect to the first feature, I find that repression decreases equilibrium cognitive effort, allowing propagandists to make more extreme claims without raising suspicion. This is because citizens are forced to obey the propagandist regardless of the state of the world, so correctly determining it is less important. This result contradicts some recent game-theoretic work (Gurieva and Treisman, 2015), but is consistent with classical theories of repression and propaganda (Kohn-Bramstedt, 1945). It also suggests a testable empirical prediction: the cheaper repression, the more extreme propagandistic rhetoric. With respect to the second feature, it is generally thought that in a crisis, politicians increase propaganda (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). However, because during a crisis the stakes of wrongly assessing the state of the world are higher, increasing citizens' incentives to think critically, I find that propagandists moderate their evidence-free rhetoric during crises to avoid raising suspicion. Consequently, such rhetoric may actually be more extreme in stable polities.

## V. Discussion

The potential power of propaganda is widely acknowledged by scholars. Within political science, a large body of work documents the effectiveness of various kinds of propaganda in shaping citizens' beliefs and behavior across a wide range of situations. However, the mechanisms by which propaganda motivates behavior and the precise conditions under which different kinds of propaganda are effective remain unclear. In particular, while empirical work on propaganda consisting of factually false statements and lies has been well-complemented by a substantial game-theoretic literature, theoretical work on other types of propaganda is a still-growing field.

Recent scholarly attempts to apply formal theory to analyze propaganda consisting of unsubstantiated or entirely non-factual claims have both deployed and gone beyond the Bayesian learning framework used in standard communication models. I suggest some non-Bayesian mechanisms by which such types of propaganda might motivate belief or behavioral changes, and derive some interesting results; for example, that identity propaganda's effectiveness depends on its observability to other social groups, and that propagandistic rhetoric and speculations may be more extreme in times

of political stability.

Future efforts in the formal-theoretic analysis of propaganda should work to enable empirical tests of the conditions under which different types of propaganda are effective, and further analyze how different features of the background environment in a state affect the use and effectiveness of propaganda. One important theoretical goal might be to construct a more general theory of propaganda that scrutinizes how informational and non-informational propaganda interact.

## References

- Adena, Maja, Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, Veronica Santarosa and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2015. "Radio and the rise of Nazi in pre-war Germany." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130(4):1885–1939.
- Akerlof, George A. and Rachel E. Kranton. 2000. "Economics and Identity." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115(3):715–752.
- Baliga, Sandeep and Tomas Sjöström. 2012. "The strategy of manipulating conflict." *American Economic Review* 102(6):2897–2922.
- Benjamin, Daniel J., James J. Choi and A. Joshua Strickland. 2010. "Social identity and preferences." *American Economic Review* 100(4):1913–1928.
- Bleck, Jaimie and Kristin Michelitch. 2017. "Capturing the airwaves, capturing the nation: Citizen response to putschist-controlled radio." *Journal of Politics* 79(3):873–889.
- Brass, Paul R. 1997. *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Callander, Steven. 2008. "A theory of policy expertise." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3(2):123–140.
- Cantoni, Davide, Yuyu Chen, David Y. Yang, Noam Yuchtman and Y. Jane Zhang. 2017. "Curriculum and ideology." *Journal of Political Economy* 125(2):338–392.
- Chen, Jidong and Yiqing Xu. 2017. "Information manipulation and reforms in authoritarian regimes." *Political Science Research and Methods* 5(1):163–178.
- Chen, Yan and Sherry Xin Li. 2009. "Group identity and social preferences." *American Economic Review* 99(1):431–457.
- Crawford, Vincent P. and Joel Sobel. 1982. "Strategic information transmission." *Econometrica* 50(6):1431–1451.
- DellaVigna, Stefano, Ruben Enikolopov, Vera Mironova, Maria Petrova and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2014. "Cross-border media and nationalism: Evidence from Serbian radio in Croatia." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 6(3):103–132.
- Dickson, Eric S. and Kenneth Scheve. 2006. "Social identity, political speech, and electoral competition." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 18(1):5–39.
- Edmond, Chris. 2013. "Information manipulation, coordination, and regime change." *Review of Economic Studies* 80(4):1422–1458.
- Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin. 2000. "Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity." *International Organization* 54(4):845–877.
- Gehlbach, Scott and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. "Government control of the media." *Journal of Public Economics* 118:163–171.
- Glaeser, Edward L. 2005. "The political economy of hatred." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120(1):45–86.
- Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman. 2015. "How modern dictators survive: Cooptation, censorship, propaganda, and repression." CEPR Discussion Paper.
- Horowitz, Donald. 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Horz, Carlo M. 2017. "Identity propaganda." Unpublished manuscript, Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.
- Horz, Carlo M. 2018. "Propaganda and skepticism." Unpublished manuscript, Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. "Propaganda as signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47(4):419–437.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2018. "The pathology of hard propaganda." *Journal of Politics* 80(3):1034–1038.
- Jowett, Garth S. and Victoria J. O'Donnell. 2015. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Kamenica, Emir and Matthew Gentzkow. 2011. "Bayesian persuasion." *American Economic Review* 101(October):2590–2615.
- Kern, Holger Lutz and Jens Hainmueller. 2009. "Opium for the masses: How foreign media can stabilize authoritarian regimes." *Political Analysis* 17(4):377–399.
- Kohn-Bramstedt, Ernst. 1945. *Dictatorship and Political Police: The Technique of Control by Fear*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company.
- Landa, Dimitri and Dominik Duell. 2015. "Social identity and electoral accountability." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3):671–689.
- Little, Andrew. 2018. Fake news, propaganda, and lies can be pervasive even if they aren't persuasive. In *Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation, Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 28(2).
- Little, Andrew T. 2017. "Propaganda and credulity." *Games and Economic Behavior* 102(March):224–232.
- Mukand, Sharun W. and Arthur Blouin. Forthcoming. "Erasing ethnicity? Propaganda and nation building in Rwanda." *Journal of Political Economy*.
- Mukand, Sharun W. and Dani Rodrik. 2016. "Ideas versus in-

- terests: A unified political economy framework." Unpublished manuscript, University of Warwick.
- Myerson, Roger B. 1992. "On the value of game theory in social science." *Rationality and Society* 4(1):62–73.
- Peisakhin, Leonid and Arturas Rozenas. Forthcoming. "Electoral effects of biased media: Russian television in Ukraine." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Penn, Elizabeth Maggie. 2008. "Citizenship versus ethnicity: The role of institutions in shaping identity choice." *Journal of Politics* 70(4):956–973.
- Perez-Oviedo, Wilson. 2015. "Citizens, dictators and networks: A game theory approach." *Rationality and Society* 27(1):3–39.
- Petty, Richard E. and John T. Cacioppo. 1986. *The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion*. Springer New York.
- Prunier, Gérard. 1995. *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schnakenberg, Keith E. 2014. "Group identity and symbolic political behavior." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9(2):137–167.
- Shapiro, Jesse M. 2016. "Special interests and the media: Theory and an application to climate change." *Journal of Public Economics* 144:91–108.
- Shayo, Moses. 2009. "A model of social identity with an application to political economy: Nation, class, and redistribution." *American Political Science Review* 103(2):147–174.
- Sobel, Joel. 2013. Giving and receiving advice. In *Advances in Economics and Econometrics, Tenth World Congress, Volume I, Economic Theory*, ed. Daron Acemoglu, Manuel Arellano and Eddie Dekel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 305–341.
- Tajfel, Henri and John Turner. 1979. The social psychology of intergroup relations. In *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel. Monterey, California: Wadsworth pp. 33–47.
- Yanagizawa-Drott, David. 2014. "Propaganda and conflict: Theory and evidence from the Rwandan genocide." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(4):1947–1994.

## Media Freedom Decline in Democracies: Lessons from Latin America

by **Marisa Kellam**  
Waseda University

The anti-media rhetoric that U.S. President Donald Trump and some European leaders use to attack the press has recently drawn public attention and raised concern about endogenous threats to democracy (Cohen, 2018; Edsall, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Boston Globe Editorial Board, 2018). For some time,

observers of Latin America have been raising red flags about attacks on media freedom, and thus the erosion of democracy, coming from democratically-elected populists and political outsiders (Conaghan and De la Torre, 2008; Corrales and Penfold, 2007, 2011; Kitzberger, 2013; Levitsky and Way, 2002; New York Times Editorial Board, 2012). As further evidence for this concern, press freedom watchdog organizations document a worldwide decline in media freedom in the past decade, including in democracies (Freedom House, 2017; Reporters Without Borders, 2018).

My focus here is on why and how media freedom declines in democratic countries, drawing lessons from Latin America. I discuss my research, co-authored with Elizabeth A. Stein,<sup>1</sup> and various explanations in the literature to account for these declines, in Latin America and elsewhere. Although the populist frame is in many political scientists' heads these days (Golder and Golder, 2016), we should not dismiss several other dangerous conditions for the press that comparative political science research identifies since these conditions persist in all regions of the world and pervade many of the younger democracies.

I also address the challenging question that media freedom decline in democracies raises for scholars of comparative politics: at what point do constraints on the media become so extensive that they effectively nullify a country's democratic institutions? Scholars who theorize about and study democracy tend to see free and plural media as essential for democracy (Dahl, 2000; Norris, 2009), but some point to ambiguities in the relationship between democracy and press freedom (Gunter and Mughan, 2000; Waisbord, 2000). We know that freedom of the press is not a sufficient condition for democracy; several studies have demonstrated why non-democratic regimes might benefit from permitting at least partially free media (Egorov, Guriev and Sonin, 2009; Lorentzen, 2014; Whitten-Woodring, 2009). As I discuss below, we also know that democratic governments do not necessarily prevent attacks on press freedom (Kellam and Stein, 2016; VonDoepp and Young, 2012, 2016; Waisbord, 2002). When comparativists point to press freedoms in authoritarian regimes, this feature alone does not make us question whether the regimes they study are in fact authoritarian. Yet when we analyze diminishing press freedom in democratic regimes, we must address the conceptualization and

<sup>1</sup> I thank Liz Stein for her many ideas that I have incorporated into this piece, though all errors here remain my own.



measurement of democracy itself. I examine the implications for democracy of declines in media freedom in the second part of my essay.

### *I. Why and How Media Freedom Declines in Democracies*

Even if they do not like it, most leaders in democracies accept media criticism and respect the free press (Clinton, 2018). A stark exception is when populists win elections. Whether of the European right-wing variety or the Latin American left-wing sort, populist governments are dangerous for media freedom (Waisbord, 2018). Although the media play a crucial role in delivering populist messages (Boas, 2005; Manucci, 2017), the commercial media are cast as representatives of the corrupt establishment when they oppose populist leaders (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). The anti-pluralism intrinsic to populism rejects institutions of democracy, including free media, which stand in the way of the leader's exclusive, direct representation of 'the people' (Müller, 2016). Populism thus defines media organizations as 'enemies of the people' and this polarization of the people (or leader) versus the media turns the media into a primary target for populist leaders. Through strong anti-press rhetoric and a range of tactics to control the media, populists in power diminish media freedom.

The populist frame fits several recent Latin American cases, but Latin Americanists have also described the polarization of the president against the media in traditional ideological terms (Kellam and Stein, 2016; Kitzberger, 2013). In Latin America, media ownership has traditionally been private and concentrated in the hands of wealthy families, politicians/oligarchs, and the financial sector. This concentration and the dominance of conservative interests in the media generated intense polarization between the government and the media during the presidencies of Latin America's 'Left Turn'. Leftist presidents interpreted the opposition of the media to their governments as resistance to their democratizing reforms and progressive agendas; in response, they publicly confronted the media, used various means to bypass mainstream media, passed stricter media regulations, and expanded state media (Kitzberger, 2013).

Ideological conflict may provoke and sustain government-media polarization, but polarization becomes extreme — to the point of being described as 'media wars' — when opposition political parties are electorally weak relative to the government (Kellam and

Stein, 2016). When opposition parties collapse, ideologically opposed media become the president's opposition; when there is minimal political conflict upon which to report, the media fill the void by directly challenging the president. This leads to a negative spiral in which governments' harsh anti-media rhetoric and sharp anti-government reporting are followed by government actions to silence their critics. In line with this reasoning, my co-author and I find that media freedom declines in Latin American democracies under leftist presidents who win office in landslide victories (Kellam and Stein, 2016).

Leaders not only attack the media as part of their efforts to transform the political and socioeconomic order, democratically-elected leaders also attack the media when their own hold on power is under threat or when they seek to extend their stay in office. Scholars focusing on these more instrumental motivations describe the measures that politicians take against societal actors of accountability, such as media and social movements, as rational responses to what leaders likely perceive as very real threats to their tenure (Bermeo, 2016). For instance, Latin American presidents know that a number of their peers and predecessors suffered interrupted presidencies, forcing them to leave office before their term was up, due in part to scandals and fierce media criticism (Pérez-Liñán, 2007). Some presidents may constrain the media in an effort to insulate themselves from a similar threat. VonDoepp and Young (2012) show that when democratic governments in Africa face coup plots or public protests they are more likely to attack the media, a result that they attribute to governments' heightened incentives to control information.

Governments also take measures to control the media environment in their efforts to expand their rule. Harassment of media increases when African presidents attempt to reform constitutions and remove term limits (VonDoepp and Young, 2012). In Latin America's plebiscitary presidencies, attacking critical media and expanding government-controlled media have helped presidents maintain high popularity and win repeated electoral victories and popular referenda (Conaghan and De la Torre, 2008).

So far I have discussed why democratically-elected governments may be motivated to constrain the press. Motivation is an important part of the story, but the enabling and constraining conditions that leaders face in-

fluence the extent to which media freedom actually declines (Kellam and Stein, 2016). In particular, whether media freedom declines in democracies depends on the willingness and ability of the legislative and judicial branches to check executive power. Without these checks, relatively unconstrained presidents (and prime ministers) can use supportive majorities to pass legislation that regulates the media environment or compliant courts to successfully sue journalists for defamation.

In addition to political institutions, the structure of civil society and the economy also influence the extent to which politicians are able to control and repress the media. On the one hand, civil society and economic actors may inhibit leaders who are otherwise motivated to attack media freedom. Strong media advocacy organizations, for instance, raise the cost to governments for their interference with the media (VonDoepp and Young, 2016). On the other hand, natural resource wealth may reduce political leaders dependence on economic elites, including media owners, and may even give them the resources to reshape the media market in their favor (Mazzuca, 2013). Ross (2012, 82) reports that among democracies, on average, there was no difference in levels of media freedom between oil-producing states and other states. However, regressions that control for several potential covariates show that oil reserves reduce the likelihood that a country has free media (Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle, 2017) and high natural resource rents are associated with negative changes in press freedom among democracies (Kellam and Stein, 2016).

I have emphasized threats to free media coming from governments, but corporate interests and criminal interests may also control the media in democracies. Following democratic transitions in the 1980s and 1990s, the costs and benefits of media commercialization gained substantial attention. Initially, media competition promotes more investigative reporting (Lawson and Lawson, 2002; Waisbord, 2000). However, with the reconsolidation of media ownership, the interests of corporate owners and the largest advertisers — which in many countries include the government — come to hold greater sway over the content of media coverage (Besley and Prat, 2006; Hughes and Lawson, 2005; Schiffrin, 2017). Most recently, the global recession exacerbated the crisis many media organizations already

faced with the digitalization of news (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). While some media organizations failed amid the financial pressures, others turned to government subsidies and government advertising revenue to survive. Opportunistic governments use media organizations' disadvantages to their own political advantage: subsidizing media outlets with low-rate government loans or tax breaks leaves them beholden to governments' political interests. In Latin America, the governments of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador took it even further, dramatically increasing state media ownership by purchasing media under duress, taking over broadcast spectrums of outlets that lost their licenses, and confiscating machinery.

When opposition parties collapse, ideologically opposed media become the president's opposition; when there is minimal political conflict upon which to report, the media fill the void by directly challenging the president. This leads to a negative spiral in which governments' harsh anti-media rhetoric and sharp anti-government reporting are followed by government actions to silence their critics.

Finally, weak rule of law in democracies permits attacks on media freedom from non-state actors (VonDoepp and Young, 2016; Waisbord, 2002). Judicial independence is important particularly for protecting journalists and media organizations from unfair legal harassment on the part of the government and politicians, as mentioned above, but also for ensuring that those who violently threaten or harm journalists will be punished. However, in Latin American countries, judges and journalists face similar threats; where dominant presidents or powerful cartels threaten journalists, they also seem to threaten judges, and vice versa. Criminal violence in Latin American democracies, including Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, make them very dangerous countries for journalists.<sup>2</sup> Drug cartels and corrupt police threaten and kill journalists, often with impunity. Violence targets journalists who cover topics such as corruption and drug-trafficking, but also environmental issues and human rights abuses; however,

<sup>2</sup>I base this claim on the Committee to Protect Journalists' database of journalists killed for their work since 1992 at <https://cpj.org/data/>.

politically or ideologically motivated anti-press violence is now less common in this region (Waisbord, 2002). Waisbord (2002) attributes anti-press violence and the general impunity for the perpetrators of violence, to the 'crisis of the state', weak rule of law, and rampant violence in democratic Latin America. In these circumstances, journalists fall victim to competing criminal organizations that vie for control of not just territory but also information dissemination (Holland and Rios, 2017).

Although comparative politics has only recently focused on variation in media freedom among democracies and its decline over time within democratic countries, scholars point to various circumstances, common to new democracies around the globe, that increase media vulnerability. Inevitably, after presenting research on this topic, I am asked about the implications for democracy.

## *II. Diminished Media Freedom and Democratic Backsliding*

As with the quality of democracy, respect for media freedom falls along a continuum and it is difficult to identify a point at which the media becomes sufficiently constrained that elections must be seen as mere façades for a regime that no longer meets the minimal conditions of democracy. It is important to point out that even environments that protect media freedom do not ensure that the media will act in ways to promote democratic representation and accountability. Yet without the potential for free and independent media to play their part, it is difficult to envision that democracy has a chance to thrive.

If we take empirical measures at face value, however, democracies do survive substantial degradation to media freedom, at least in the short-term. For example, the media in Venezuela faced considerable constraints on their freedom after 2002 — falling into Freedom House's 'not free' category — while the regime remained democratic according to the Polity Index for several more years.<sup>3</sup> Honduras, Colombia, and Mexico received democratic ratings for several years in a row while at the same time media freedom in those countries was classified as not free. Journalists in these

countries suffer physical violence, much of which stems from drug trafficking and organized crime, and it is not clear to me whether these types of attacks on the media directly translate into constraints on democracy.

In any case, the existence of purportedly democratic countries in which the media do not enjoy freedom is puzzling. If free media are fundamental to democracy either in and of themselves or through the media's effect on the fairness of elections and other mechanisms of democratic accountability, the endurance of democracy in regimes that suppress the news media and disrespect journalists' rights should be short-lived. In stating this, I advocate for more than a tautological claim that democracy by definition includes media freedom. While I accept this definition, I also claim that by constraining the media, leaders can facilitate further actions that combined lead to a deterioration in the quality of democracy. Illiberal leaders purposefully rein in freedom of the press as a proactive strategy to concentrate power in the executive branch and as a preemptive strategy to weaken accountability actors who might try to prevent their power grab. Only absent media freedom or amid a captured media environment would a democratically-elected leader be capable of taking other measures necessary to tip the playing field so strongly to his or her advantage and to restructure or co-opt the legislature and judiciary to suit their agenda. Liz Stein and I are currently engaged in an empirical examination of this relationship, but we expect that declines in media freedom precede democratic backsliding: the incremental degradation of multiple essential qualities of democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018).

In sum, understanding how and why media freedom declines in democracies helps us understand how and why democracy slides backwards — which are among the most important questions of our day and ones that comparativists are being called upon to answer.

## References

- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On democratic backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1):5–19.
- Besley, Timothy and Andrea Prat. 2006. "Handcuffs for the grabbing hand? Media capture and government accountability." *American Economic Review* 96(3):720–736.

---

<sup>3</sup>I refer to the Polity IV Project's Polity 2 index, which combines their 10-point autocracy index with their 10-point democracy index, running from –10 to 10. According to Polity IV's own categorization, a regime that scores 6 or higher on the Polity 2 Index is democratic (Marshall, Gurr and Jaggers, 2017). Venezuela falls to a 5 in 2006 and to a –3 in 2009.

- Boas, Taylor C. 2005. "Television and neopopulism in Latin America: Media effects in Brazil and Peru." *Latin American Research Review* 40(1):27–49.
- Boston Globe Editorial Board. 2018. "Journalists are not the enemy." *Boston Globe*, August 15.
- Clinton, Hillary Rodham. 2018. "American democracy is in crisis." *The Atlantic*, September 16.
- Cohen, Roger. 2018. "How democracy became the enemy." *New York Times*, August 28.
- Conaghan, Catherine and Carlos De la Torre. 2008. "The permanent campaign of Rafael Correa: Making Ecuador's plebiscitary presidency." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(3):267–284.
- Corrales, Javier and Michael Penfold. 2007. "Venezuela: Crowding out the opposition." *Journal of Democracy* 18(2):99–113.
- Corrales, Javier and Michael Penfold. 2011. *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Dahl, Robert A. 2000. *On Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Edsall, Thomas B. 2018. "One thing Donald Trump would like is freedom from the press." *New York Times*, March 15.
- Egorov, Georgy, Sergei Guriev and Konstantin Sonin. 2009. "Why resource-poor dictators allow freer media: A theory and evidence from panel data." *American Political Science Review* 103(4):645–668.
- Freedom House. 2017. "Press freedom's dark horizon." *Freedom of the Press*.
- Golder, Matt and Sona Golder, eds. 2016. *Populism in Comparative Perspective*, *Comparative Politics Newsletter*. Vol. 26(2) pp. 1–131.
- Guerrero, Manuel and Mireya Márquez-Ramírez, eds. 2014. *Media Systems and Communication Policies in Latin America*. Springer.
- Gunther, Richard and Anthony Mughan, eds. 2000. *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Holland, Bradley E. and Viridiana Rios. 2017. "Informally governing information: How criminal rivalry leads to violence against the press in Mexico." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(5):1095–1119.
- Hughes, Sallie and Chappell Lawson. 2005. "The barriers to media opening in Latin America." *Political Communication* 22(1):9–25.
- Kellam, Marisa and Elizabeth A Stein. 2016. "Silencing critics: Why and how presidents restrict media freedom in democracies." *Comparative Political Studies* 49(1):36–77.
- Kitzberger, Philip. 2013. "The media politics of Latin America's leftist governments." *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 4(3):123–139.
- Lawson, Joseph Chappell H. and Chappell Lawson. 2002. *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
- Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A. Way. 2002. "The rise of competitive authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 13(2):51–65.
- Lorentzen, Peter. 2014. "China's strategic censorship." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(2):402–414.
- Manucci, Luca. 2017. Populism and the media. In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Paulina Ochoa Espejo Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart and Pierre Ostiguy. New York: Oxford University Press pp. 467–488.
- Marshall, Monty G., Ted Robert Gurr and K. Jagers. 2017. "Polity IV project." *Polity IV Project*.
- Mazzuca, Sebastián L. 2013. "The rise of rentier populism." *Journal of Democracy* 24(2):108–122.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. How to think — and how not to think — about populism. In *Populism in Comparative Perspective*, *Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 26(2) pp. 58–62.
- New York Times Editorial Board. 2012. "An assault on democracy." *New York Times*, January 23.
- Norris, Pippa. 2009. *Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform*. The World Bank.
- Pérez-Liñán, Aníbal. 2007. *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reporters Without Borders. 2018. "RSF index 2018: Hatred of journalism threatens democracies." *World Press Freedom Index*.
- Ross, Michael. 2012. *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal. 2016. Populism in Latin America and beyond: Concept, causes, and consequences. In *Populism in Comparative Perspective*, *Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 26(2) pp. 72–76.
- Schiffrin, Anya, ed. 2017. *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy*. Washington, D.C: Center for International Media Assistance, National Endowment for Democracy.
- Vondoepp, Peter and Daniel J. Young. 2012. "Assaults on the fourth estate: Explaining media harassment in Africa." *Journal of Politics* 75(1):36–51.
- Vondoepp, Peter and Daniel J. Young. 2016. "Holding the state at bay: Understanding media freedoms in Africa." *Democratization* 23(7):1101–1121.
- Waisbord, Silvio. 2000. *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Waisbord, Silvio. 2002. "Antipress violence and the crisis of the state." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*



7(3):90–109.

Waisbord, Silvio. 2018. “Why populism is troubling for democratic communication.” *Communication Culture & Critique* 11(1):21–34.

Waldner, David and Ellen Lust. 2018. “Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21:93–113.

Whitten-Woodring, Jenifer. 2009. “Watchdog or lapdog? Media freedom, regime type, and government respect for human rights.” *International Studies Quarterly* 53(3):595–625.

Whitten-Woodring, Jenifer and Douglas A. Van Belle. 2017. “The correlates of media freedom: An introduction of the Global Media Freedom Dataset.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 5(1):179–188.

---

## Fake News, Propaganda, and Lies Can Be Pervasive Even If They Aren’t Persuasive

by Andrew T. Little<sup>1</sup>

University of California, Berkeley

The truth has taken a beating recently. Leading up to the 2016 election in the United States, social media was flooded with widely shared false stories. Once in office, the *Washington Post* estimated that Donald Trump made around 6 false or misleading claims per day in his first year and a half in office (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly, 2018). Acting as a legal advisor for Trump, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani went so far as to proclaim that “the truth is not the truth.” Across the pond, pro-Brexit campaigners traveled around on a bus touting a misleading claim that money saved by leaving the European Union could be spent on healthcare. And the lies told by democratic politicians generally pale in comparison to their more autocratic counterparts, who some argue now use propaganda and other forms of information manipulation rather than violence as the key technology to retain power (Guriev and Treisman, 2015; Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik, 2016).

These observations have led to considerable hand-wringing. A review of several recent books on the theme observed that “in the publishing world circa summer 2018, the death-of-truth brigade is rivaled only by the death-of-democracy crew” (Lozada, 2018).

Here I present some reasons to resist extreme pessimism. I primarily focus on the United States since the 2016 election, but draw on a combination of work about persuasion (often U.S. based) as well as recent work in comparative politics, particularly the study of information manipulation in authoritarian contexts. Two general themes from these literatures and related work are (1) manipulating beliefs is hard, and having the ability to manipulate information may backfire; and (2) actions that appear to be about manipulating beliefs often serve other purposes.<sup>2</sup>

The point is not to say, as the dog surrounded by a house on fire in a popular meme does, that “this is fine” (Plante, 2016). Rather, I aim to show that a key mechanism underlying much of this pessimistic writing — that readers of fake news and the like are actually persuaded — deserves a healthy dose of skepticism (Nyhan, 2018).

### I. Causes for Concern

Here is the case for concern in brief. First, there is an increasing supply of bad information available to citizens. This is partly driven by changes to traditional media, such as the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the increasing prevalence of opinion journalism rather than factual and investigative reporting (Rich and Kavanagh, 2018). New information and communication technologies such as social media have also made it easier to produce and consume false information. Second, the increased supply of information in general has arguably made it easier for people to find information that conforms to their prior beliefs (Sunstein, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

Combined, these trends are troubling on an individual level. They plausibly render citizens less informed about the costs and benefits of proposed policies and the performance of politicians in office. However, they might be even more problematic on a collective level. Even if citizens do have the exact same information, increased partisanship (‘motivated reasoning’) may lead to bigger disagreements about the performance of politicians *and* the quality and bias of news sources (Little, 2018). Perhaps worse, everyone receiving their own prior-reinforcing and dubious information makes

---

<sup>1</sup>Many thanks to Matt Golder, Carlo Horz, Josh Kalla, Brendan Nyhan, Alex Matovski, and Daniel Stone for helpful comments and discussion.

<sup>2</sup>For an alternative perspective on this literature, which emphasizes when propaganda can be effective, see Horz (2018).

<sup>3</sup>While intuitively plausible, empirical evidence on this point is mixed (Barberá et al., 2015; Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016).

it harder to have a ‘common set of facts’ in order to make good policy and simply coexist with those who hold different political views (Rich and Kavanagh, 2018).

## II. Why We Shouldn't Be That Concerned

The situation described above is bleak. Here are some theoretical and empirical reasons to avoid hitting the panic button immediately.

**Persuasion is hard.** If we are to be concerned about the effect of misinformation on people's beliefs, we need reason to think that they actually *believe* the misinformation. However, a general theme from empirical and theoretical work on persuasion — in the U.S. and more comparatively — is that persuasion is really hard. The notion that campaigns and other forms of persuasion may have ‘minimal effects’ is old and influential (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954), if not universally accepted.<sup>4</sup>

We can't infer from the prevalence of fake news and the like that opinions are being meaningfully changed or society further polarized. We simply don't have any direct evidence of fake news having a large impact on political beliefs or behavior.

A first reason to be skeptical of the potential for persuasion is that on the kinds of consequential beliefs that politicians and other actors care to manipulate — Which party should I vote for? Is [insert prominent policy proposal] a good idea? Is [insert prominent politician] trustworthy? — people have a lot of information.<sup>5</sup> Even if a message on one of these topics is taken at face value, when the audience has observed hundreds or thousands of messages with similar precision the marginal impact of each one will be minimal.

To give something of a formalization, suppose a citizen is forming a belief about how well a politician is doing in office, represented by a continuous variable  $\theta$ , where higher values of  $\theta$  correspond to better performance. She starts with no information, and then observes  $n > 1$  signals of the form  $s_i = \theta + \epsilon_i$ , where the  $\epsilon_i$ 's are noise terms that are normally distributed with mean 0 and variance  $\sigma^2$ ; that is, the signals aren't perfect, but are unbiased — correct on average.

If she forms her belief about the politician using Bayes' rule, then the mean of her posterior belief will be the average of all the signals:  $\sum_{i=1}^n s_i / n$ .<sup>6</sup> Importantly, when  $n$  is large — that is, on issues where she has lots of information — even an extreme value of an individual  $s_i$  will have a small impact on her final belief, since the impact is divided by  $n$ .

Of course this is a simplistic example, but most of the natural complications only reinforce the conclusion that individual signals are unlikely to matter much. If the citizen does not have an uninformative prior belief, some weight will get placed on the prior belief and less on the individual signals. If the signals are not independent, the informational content of each will be lessened.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the signals that citizens observe — particularly when studying incendiary misinformation — are rarely unbiased. In the extreme, knowledge of the bias of the sender can completely undermine any learning because the audience can adjust for bias/slant.

To see why, suppose there is a binary state of the world (say, Clinton would be a better president/Trump would be better).<sup>8</sup> A ‘sender’ knows this state, or at least has some meaningful knowledge that a ‘receiver’ lacks. Assume the receiver knows that the sender wants to persuade her to hold a particular belief — say, that Clinton is the better candidate. The receiver might expect that the sender will always pick the message correspond-

<sup>4</sup>See Kalla and Broockman (2018) for a recent overview as well as a meta-analysis and new evidence that strongly supports the minimal effects hypothesis.

<sup>5</sup>Tellingly, people may be easier to persuade on ‘new’ issues like transgender rights (Broockman and Kalla, 2016).

<sup>6</sup>Of course, the assumption of using Bayes' rule is consequential, frequently criticized in empirical work, and loosened in an increasing volume of theoretical work (Little, 2018). Still, the general principle here — that if there are many messages, the average message can't be too influential — should hold for any updating mechanism.

<sup>7</sup>Two caveats here. First, some recent prominent work indicates that people may not correctly adjust for the correlation in the signals that they receive (Levy and Razin, 2015). Second, absent prior information, a constant correlation between all signals does not change the weight assigned to the individual signals.

<sup>8</sup>What follows is a verbal description of a binary-state version of Crawford and Sobel (1982).

ing to his bias (“Clinton is better”), in which case the message is completely uninformative. And this receiver conjecture is reasonable: if she were to listen to the sender at all, the sender would always want to send the message in favor of his position. So, it can’t be the case that the sender message is informative and the receiver responds to it.

Now, consider a slightly more complex environment where the state variable is continuous (that is, higher values mean an incumbent politician is doing better), and the sender message varies continuously along this dimension.<sup>9</sup> Set up in a standard way, a typical equilibrium in a model like this involves a sender — who wants the receiver to think the politician is doing well but pays a cost to lie — exaggerating the truth by a fixed amount. To put numbers to it, imagine the content of the message is “On a scale from 1 – 10, how good of a job is Trump doing?”; an equilibrium to this model might involve the sender adding, say, 3 points to what he really thinks. If this is the sender strategy, then the optimal receiver belief is to take what the sender says and subtract 3. The sender can be caught in a trap of expectations: if lying or exaggerating less than expected, the receiver will think Trump is doing *worse* than he really is, and so the sender has to tell costly lies to keep up.

So, the sender’s attempts to persuade run into two problems: the receiver discounts what he says, and if there are other messages out there each sender message has a small impact in the first place.<sup>10</sup>

These arguments do suggest some reasons to think fake news might be more dangerous than more traditional political advertising. We have assumed that the receiver knows the bias of the sender, which may not hold in this context. Outlandish made-up stories about Clinton did not end with the disclaimer “I am a Moldovan teenage-troll and I made up this message.” However, there is evidence people are generally able to discern untruthful political claims (Woon, 2017). And Little and Nasser (2018) show that persuasion is difficult even if the receiver is partially ‘credulous’ at the outset; that is, he thinks there is some chance the sender

is honest or unbiased. Further, despite the decisive pro-Trump bias in fake news spread on social media, Trump did better among groups that used the Internet less (Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2018).

If we are to be concerned about the effect of misinformation on people’s beliefs, we need reason to think that they actually *believe* the misinformation. However, a general theme from empirical and theoretical work on persuasion — in the U.S. and more comparatively — is that persuasion is really hard.

Another reasonable concern is that even if individual fake news stories have marginal effect, it is possible that heavier exposure to information with a particular skew may matter. For example, several well-identified studies of exposure to partisan television and advertising find an effect on voter behavior in the U.S. (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2018). However, the comparative evidence on this point across countries and media technologies is mixed (Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya, 2011; Kern and Hainmueller, 2009).<sup>11</sup> Still, the most rigorous analysis of fake news to date, discussed in more detail below, indicates that the volume of exposure to fake news is far more modest than in traditional outlets, and as a result likely has a much smaller effect than that identified in these studies (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Further, when dealing with polarizing issues where in the end people make a binary decision, such as who to vote for, it is unlikely that many are close to changing their minds (Kalla and Broockman, 2018). To connect to the previous example, if there is some critical belief about the politician performance where the citizen votes to re-elect if and only if the average belief about the politician performance is above  $\hat{\theta}$ , individual signals will only ‘matter’ if they push the belief above or below this threshold. If citizens are very polarized, there will be very few close to this threshold, so even

<sup>9</sup>A classic reference here is Holmstrom (1999); see Little (2015) for a comparative politics application to fraud in authoritarian elections. These models typically assume that the sender does not know the truth and chooses a degree of manipulation to the signal, but under some parametric assumptions the equilibrium is the same if the sender knows the truth (Little and Nasser, 2018).

<sup>10</sup>In addition to this ‘equilibrium discounting’, people are reasonably good at detecting political lies (Woon, 2017).

<sup>11</sup>See Little (2016) for an overview and theoretical argument for why this might be the case.

<sup>12</sup>Of course, we may be concerned about extremists become more extreme for other reasons; see Stone (2017) for a recent model where

reasonably persuasive arguments may not be decision-relevant.<sup>12</sup> There is good reason to think this observation is highly relevant for fake news, as extreme partisans show the strongest appetite for misinformation (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2018).

### **Do people believe what they hear? What they say?**

An obvious counter to the observations above is that surveys indicate many people *do* believe frequently purveyed falsehoods. Here is a colorful example. A recent *Washington Post* survey showed pictures of the crowds from the Trump and Obama inaugurations, with the latter clearly much larger (Schaffner and Luks, 2017). Despite the ubiquity of these photos in the news, when asked which inauguration corresponded to the photo with the larger crowd, around 40% of Trump voters answered incorrectly (compared to about 10% of Clinton voters and 20% of nonvoters). More striking, when asked the seemingly obvious and factual question of which crowd was larger, 15% of Trump voters answered incorrectly;<sup>13</sup> presumably those who truly knew which picture was which and wanted to cheerlead their candidate. Beyond the arguably overblown debate over crowd sizes, an Ipsos/Buzzfeed survey found that a majority of all Trump and Clinton voters who recalled seeing false headlines believed them to be somewhat or very accurate (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016).

Of course it is easy to find similar examples outside of the United States. A substantial majority of Russians followed their government in blaming Ukrainian forces for the downing of flight MH17 despite strong international consensus to the contrary (Toal and O'Loughlin, 2017). In many countries throughout the world, more people think the United States or Israel were behind the 9/11 attacks than Al-Qaeda, an impression some governments are eager to support, or at least not oppose (Klein, 2008).

But there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to avoid taking these responses too seriously. Both in answering survey questions and in 'real life', people face incentives to engage in preference falsification (Kuran, 1997). While these pressures are likely stronger in more authoritarian settings, Kuran (1997) also includes examples of how answering survey questions on

sensitive topics can lead to conformist incentives outweighing the desire to tell the truth. And when people are given incentives to answer questions correctly, the disagreement among partisans diminishes substantially (Bullock et al., 2015).

Why do such conformist motives lead people to go along with exaggerations or outright falsehoods espoused by elites? Little (2017) suggests one reason. If the less informed members of a group aren't as good at recognizing lies, they will tend to credulously accept what they are told. More informed members of the group recognize what are lies and what aren't, but the pressure to conform makes them go along with the less informed. More concretely, even if a sizable majority of a political party endorses a falsehood, many may realize that what they are saying is unlikely to be true but are simply going along with what they think they are supposed to say on the subject (Bailey, 2017).

More specifically, in the context of the 2016 U.S. election, the most careful studies are not so dire. First, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) find that while respondents recall (and sometimes believe) prominent fake news headlines, they only do so at a marginally higher rate than 'placebo' stories that the authors made up. So, even if fake news was widely read, it did not seem to leave a lasting impression. Second, only a small slice of the population had heavy exposure to fake news in the first place (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2018); and as discussed above, these are precisely the groups least likely to have their views (and voting decisions) swayed by small or even large amounts of new information.

**Persuasion may not be the goal.** If persuasion via manipulating information is so hard and has limited success, why would anyone bother doing it in the first place? First, as discussed above, a common theme of models of communication is that if the audience expects to hear from a sender and expects they will exaggerate, the sender may be compelled to send biased messages to keep up with expectations (Holmstrom, 1999; Little, 2015). Even if the audience would be persuaded by only slightly exaggerated stories, those who are free to manipulate information easily may not be able to restrain themselves to tell believable lies (Little

---

such polarization can occur from common signals and leads to bad outcomes. Svolik (2018) argues that such polarization can lead to tolerance for anti-democratic behavior against political foes. Still, whether fake news as it exists now is really leading to such polarization is an open question (Lazer et al., 2018).

<sup>13</sup> A much smaller fraction of Clinton voters and non-voters made the same error.



and Nasser, 2018)

In the case of leaders, the purpose of spreading misinformation may not be to persuade anyone in the first place. Particularly in authoritarian contexts, getting subordinates to go along with and even repeat crazy lies about leaders' ability can serve as a screening device for loyalty (Marquez, Forthcoming; Crabtree, Kern and Siegel, 2018). While democratic leaders have less to fear from disloyal subordinates, they may use extreme lies for the same purpose (Cowen, 2017).

What about fake news spread by others? A general consensus holds that, in addition to helping Donald Trump, a goal of the Russian intelligence operations during the 2016 elections and beyond was to push contentious issues like racial bias in policing and whether vaccines are safe (Stewart, Arif and Starbird, 2018; Broniatowski et al., Forthcoming). Whether this succeeded in raising the prominence of these debates relative to a counterfactual world without these trolling campaigns or had deeper negative effects on political discourse is an open question.

Other purveyors of false information seem to have a simpler motive: making money. The aforementioned Macedonian teenagers who made thousands of dollars a month getting people (mostly Americans) to read articles touting the imminent indictment of Hillary Clinton likely cared little if the readers believed the story. Their goal was "to generate traffic [by getting] their politics stories to spread on Facebook", and found through trial and error that "the best way to generate shares on Facebook is to publish sensationalist and often false content that caters to Trump supporters." An American creator of fake news tracked down by NPR reached the same conclusion (Sydell, 2016). And while he claimed his goal was to discredit the extreme right by exposing their gullibility to false stories, he also admitted that making ten to thirty thousand dollars a month was an incentive as well.

Millions of people saw the famous Onion headline "Drugs win Drug War", and the advertising revenue from viewers of this and other satirical writings is how "America's Finest News Source" makes money. But this headline did not lead to citizens rising up and calling for the resignation of top officials at the Drug Enforcement

Agency as punishment for their failure. Perhaps the effect of more malicious-seeming fake news is more similar to this open satire than the death-of-truth brigade would have you think.

### III. All It Takes Is A Little Responsiveness

In sum, we can't infer from the prevalence of fake news and the like that opinions are being meaningfully changed or society further polarized. We simply don't have any direct evidence of fake news having a large impact on political beliefs or behavior (Lazer et al., 2018). While it is possible that future research will uncover such evidence, what we know about strategic communication and information manipulation in general does not make this seem likely.

I admit it is hard to completely shrug off advisors to the most powerful person in the world insisting on his right to "alternative facts" and the fact that most of his allied politicians and voters seem unbothered by this rhetoric. But even if one doubts the arguments above, holding politicians accountable for their performance doesn't require every citizen to digest unbiased signals in an objective and rational manner.<sup>14</sup> As long as we resolve political differences with fair elections, even a modest number of centrists who generally respond to how their politicians behave in a reasonable manner (particularly paired with an energized opposition) can defeat incumbents with completely ossified and information-resistant bases.

### References

- Allcott, Hunt and Matthew Gentzkow. 2017. "Social media and fake news in the 2016 election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2):211–36.
- Ashworth, Scott and Ethan Bueno de Mesquita. 2014. "Is voter competence good for voters?: Information, rationality, and democratic performance." *American Political Science Review* 108(3):565–587.
- Bailey, Ronald. 2017. "Trump, propaganda, and credulity." *Reason*, February 24.
- Barberá, Pablo, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker and Richard Bonneau. 2015. "Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber?" *Psychological Science* 26(10):1531–1542.
- Berelson, Bernard R., Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee. 1954. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in*

<sup>14</sup>In fact, Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2014) show that deviations from standard rationality can improve voter welfare by changing the behavior of politicians.

- a *Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2018. "A note on internet use and the 2016 US presidential election outcome." *PLOS ONE* 13(7).
- Broniatowski, David A., Amelia M. Jamison, SiHua Qi, Lulwah AlKulaib, Tao Chen, Adrian Benton, Sandra C. Quinn and Mark Dredze. Forthcoming. "Weaponized health communication: Twitter bots and Russian trolls amplify the vaccine debate." *American Journal of Public Health*.
- Broockman, David and Joshua Kalla. 2016. "Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing." *Science* 352(6282):220–224.
- Bullock, John G., Alan S. Gerber, Seth J. Hill and Gregory A. Huber. 2015. "Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 10(4):519–578.
- Cowen, Tyler. 2017. "Why Trump's staff is lying: It's both a loyalty test and a proclamation of power." *Bloomberg*, January 23.
- Crabtree, Charles, Holger L. Kern and David A. Siegel. 2018. "Cults of personality, preference falsification, and the dictator's dilemma." Unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan.
- Crawford, Vincent P. and Joel Sobel. 1982. "Strategic information transmission." *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* 50(6):1431–1451.
- DellaVigna, Stefano and Ethan Kaplan. 2007. "The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122(3):1187–1234.
- Enikolopov, Ruben, Maria Petrova and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2011. "Media and political persuasion: Evidence from Russia." *American Economic Review* 101(7):3253–3285.
- Flaxman, Seth, Sharad Goel and Justin M. Rao. 2016. "Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and online news consumption." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80(S1):298–320.
- Gehlbach, Scott, Konstantin Sonin and Milan Svolik. 2016. "Formal models of nondemocratic politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19:565–584.
- Guess, Andrew, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. 2018. "Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign." Unpublished manuscript, Princeton University.
- Guriev, Sergei M. and Daniel Treisman. 2015. "How modern dictators survive: Cooptation, censorship, propaganda, and repression." CEPR Discussion Paper No. DP10454.
- Holmstrom, Bengt. 1999. "Managerial incentive problems: A dynamic perspective." *Review of Economic Studies* 66(1):169–182.
- Horz, Carlo. 2018. Informational and non-informational propaganda. In *Fake News and the Politics of Misinformation, Comparative Politics Newsletter*, ed. Matt Golder and Sona Golder. Vol. 28(2).
- Kalla, Joshua L. and David E. Broockman. 2018. "The minimal persuasive effects of campaign contact in general elections: Evidence from 49 field experiments." *American Political Science Review* 112(1):148–166.
- Kern, Holger Lutz and Jens Hainmueller. 2009. "Opium for the masses: How foreign media can stabilize authoritarian regimes." *Political Analysis* 17(4):377–399.
- Kessler, Glenn, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly. 2018. "President Trump has made 3, 251 false or misleading claims in 497 days." *Washington Post*, June 1.
- Klein, Kent. 2008. "Global poll shows doubt about al-Qaida role in 9/11 attacks." *VOA News*, September 10.
- Kuran, Timur. 1997. *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lazer, David M.J., Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild et al. 2018. "The science of fake news." *Science* 359(6380):1094–1096.
- Levy, Gilat and Ronny Razin. 2015. "Correlation neglect, voting behavior, and information aggregation." *American Economic Review* 105(4):1634–1645.
- Little, Andrew T. 2015. "Fraud and monitoring in non-competitive elections." *Political Science Research and Methods* 3(1):21–41.
- Little, Andrew T. 2016. "Communication technology and protest." *Journal of Politics* 78(1):152–166.
- Little, Andrew T. 2017. "Propaganda and credulity." *Games and Economic Behavior* 102:224–232.
- Little, Andrew T. 2018. "The distortion of related beliefs." Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley.
- Little, Andrew T. and Sherif Nasser. 2018. "Unbelievable lies." Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley.
- Lozada, Carlos. 2018. "Can truth survive this president: An honest investigation." *Washington Post*, July 13.
- Marquez, Xavier. Forthcoming. "Two models of political leader cults: Propaganda and ritual." *Politics, Religion, & Ideology*.
- Martin, Gregory J. and Ali Yurukoglu. 2017. "Bias in cable news: Persuasion and polarization." *American Economic Review* 107(9):2565–99.
- Nyhan, Brendan. 2018. "Fake news and bots may be worrisome, but their political power is overblown." *New York Times*, February 13.
- Plante, Chris. 2016. "This Is Fine creator explains the timelessness of his meme." *The Verge*, May 5.
- Rich, Michael D. and Jennifer Kavanagh. 2018. *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Rand Corporation.
- Schaffner, Brian and Samantha Luks. 2017. "This is what Trump voters said when asked to compare his inauguration crowd with Obama's." *Washington Post*, January 25.

- Silverman, Craig and Jeremy Singer-Vine. 2016. “Most Americans who see fake news believe it, new survey says.” *BuzzFeed News*, December 6.
- Spenkuch, Jörg L and David Toniatti. 2018. “Political advertising and election results.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (133):1981–2036.
- Stewart, Leo G., Ahmer Arif and Kate Starbird. 2018. Examining trolls and polarization with a retweet network. In *Proc. ACM WSDM, Workshop on Misinformation and Misbehavior Mining on the Web*.
- Stone, Daniel F. 2017. “Just a big misunderstanding? Bias and Bayesian affective polarization.” Unpublished manuscript, Bowdoin College.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2018. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2018. “When polarization trumps civic virtue: Partisan conflict and the subversion of democracy by incumbents.” Unpublished manuscript, Yale University.
- Sydell, Laura. 2016. “We tracked down a fake-news creator in the suburbs. Here’s what we learned.” National Public Radio, November 23.
- Toal, Gerard and John O’Loughlin. 2017. “Why did MH17 crash?: Blame attribution, television news and public opinion in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea and the de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria.” *Geopolitics* pp. 1–35.
- Woon, Jonathan. 2017. “Political lie detection.” Unpublished manuscript, University of Pittsburgh.

## Why Do Governments Censor? Expanding from State Survival to Content Regulation Theories in Political Science

by **Stephen Meserve**  
Texas Tech University

The utopian technologist conceptual frame of the Internet as a free-for-all platform, fundamentally beyond private or public control, is gone. Digital content generally passes through one or more private points of control (Zittrain, 2003), whether this is an Internet service provider such as Comcast, a digital service provider such as Google, or a social media network such as Twitter. Content control and management is receiving increased public scrutiny due to controversies associated with the 2016 U.S. presidential election, combined with

more general anxieties about how content serving algorithms affect individual political attitudes, democratic discourse, and political behavior (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Sunstein, 2017). But when democratic publics discuss how access to digital content should be restricted, those discussions are usually framed in terms of how private companies should manage their own platforms rather than how governments should manage content on the Internet.

It is sometimes taken for granted that governments themselves are largely hands-off with respect to digital content in democracies. Even within political science, most of the empirical investigations into content restriction and censorship take place in the context of authoritarian regimes. An increasingly rich literature focuses on the strategies and motivations of authoritarian regimes with respect to digital content (Roberts, 2018) and the ways in which protest movements and coercive regimes react to one another in the digital context (Tufekci, 2017). The academic discussion is much more muted, however, and different in tone, when it turns to democracies, and especially developed democracies, usually focusing on elections or the polarization of the public (Farrell, 2012). Yet, democracies engage in a great deal of content removal. By and large, the difference between democracies and authoritarian regimes is that content removal in democracies is done indirectly through private points of control — leaning on private actors to censor digital materials and prevent public access. The contrast in strategy between democracies and authoritarian regimes in the digital realm is quite stark. Authoritarian regimes tend to rely on more direct means of content removal and restriction, either setting up control systems themselves or outright restricting companies that might publish or link to objectionable content from doing local business, while democracies typically take down content from the Internet using legal institutions or through executive or police requests to private points of control.<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of empirical social science, one of the most intriguing elements of democratic use of private points of control for censorship activities is that they generate traceable data that is broadly comparable across countries. Private points of control like

<sup>1</sup>The recently publicized Google search engine created to comply with Chinese censorship laws, Dragonfly, is a relatively novel way of approaching authoritarian digital content restriction (Gallagher, 2018). Google had previously been restricted from operating within China by the government via more direct means. Similarly, indirect means through private points of control are not the only way democracies restrict the Internet, just the most typical and visible way they do so. Other methods of content control taken by national security institutions in democracies, for example, sometimes do not fit into this simplified narrative.

Facebook, Twitter, and Google compile and publicize extensive data on how many requests they receive, from what countries, and how often they take down content from their services, probably because of the irksome, tangible costs of trying to track down content and verify the removal request's legality. While the requests are generally not individually identifiable, some firms even provide example vignettes of the types of court and other government requests they receive to provide overall context. The publication of data means that social scientists gain a sense of how much censorship countries around the world attempt to engage in on the Internet — information that is difficult to come by in other contexts regarding content and speech suppression.

In practice, some governments engage in censorship behavior at vastly different rates than others. There is a great deal of room, therefore, to theorize as to why certain countries censor content from their citizens and why other countries rarely do so. In one article, my co-author and I look at which democracies send high volumes of censorship requests and which do not (Meserve and Pemstein, 2018). We find that variables reflecting internal security concerns, incentives for politicians to value their personal reputations, and country intellectual property production predict which countries censor the Internet via shared multinational points of control. Broadly speaking, our findings point toward two ways to think about the control of digital content in democracies. One is traditional. It parallels theories relevant to authoritarian regimes, with state actors protecting their internal security and reputations, and is well trod by political scientists in other contexts. But we also find evidence that conceptualizing content removal as a more mundane form of domestic regulatory activity that nevertheless censors content bears theoretical and empirical fruit, and reflects areas where scholars of sociology, digital communications, and law are ahead of many political scientists in their thinking about censorship. In what follows, I highlight the conceptual differences between those two ways of thinking about censorship and briefly discuss possible directions for future research implied by considering content removal and censorship in democracies as a process resembling regulation rather than repression.

## *I. Security and Censorship in Democracies*

Overall, within political science, discussion of censorship tends to focus on the type of state behavior that is easiest to classify as normatively negative. Political scientists most often investigate state survival as a motivation for censorship. States censor activities that threaten their internal or external security and seek to remove it. For authoritarian regimes, the question is relatively settled; a wide literature exists on the social and political control of information within autocratic regimes (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Gunitsky, 2015; Chen and Xu, 2017a,b; Roberts, 2018). The work generally concerns the interplay between social media systems, anti-regime forces, and the authoritarian regimes' attempting to keep a lid on the digital marketplace — or using it to their advantage. Extending the logic, it is also fair to think of democracies engaging in censorship for the same reason. Democracies may censor as a means of political control, particularly as a means of controlling potentially state-threatening actors. It therefore makes sense to draw from a parallel corpus of theory regarding protection of the existing regime in the democratic context.

Broadly speaking, one motivation to remove content is internal stability. Democracies around the world face a variety of tangible threats from internal and external actors taking the form of protests and violent opposition. But in contrast to authoritarian regimes, democracies more frequently use observable legal channels, by demanding private points of control remove content from their servers and networks rather than taking more heavy-handed, direct solutions to opposition. Controlling opposition speech and organizational capacity applies to democratic governments but, in many ways, runs in direct opposition to their substantive character as democracies with an open marketplace of ideas and institutionalized openness to political competition. In general, it seems straightforward to classify most censorship behavior motivated by suppressing opposition speech and organizational capacity as a normatively 'bad' form of censorship resembling what we see in authoritarian regimes.<sup>2</sup> So it goes that governments experiencing internal or external threats should lean on private points of control more heavily to remove all kinds of threatening content. National security is, historically,

<sup>2</sup>But even here, one can point to very real exceptions — are court and executive orders taking down terrorist propaganda objectionable speech expression? How about incitements to violent protest activity?

<sup>3</sup>These codings can be deceptive, as what is labelled as national security could often have more mundane motives or vice versa. I high-



the most coded topic area of takedowns in Google's data (Google Incorporated, 2018c).<sup>3</sup> A good example of this type of censorship comes from India, where a vignette described by Google states that “we received a request from police in Haryana to remove 218 YouTube videos related to major March protests happening in Haryana and Delhi, claiming to contain hate speech and agitation to violence”; Google largely complied with these requests (Google Incorporated, 2018a). In short, the state identifies actors of concern and works to suppress their access to online spaces.

Another clear-cut use of censorship tools in democracies, found frequently in vignettes of requests, is reputation protection by incumbent politicians, bureaucrats, and other government actors such as the police. These sorts of concerns also fit nicely into the aforementioned narrative of political actors using private points of control in order to control threats. In this case, the information is not threatening the state but rather threatening the electoral chances or reputations of political actors. These sorts of incentives vary greatly depending on the system in question, however. We find that in democracies where the reputations of individual politicians matter more, the state is more likely to attempt to restrict content using legal or executive tools. A short vignette from Italy highlights this sort of behavior, where Google describes that “in response to a court order, we removed a blog post from the blogspot.it domain that allegedly defamed an individual by speculating that he was making a profit from charging the government fees for housing officials and was able to do so because of his association with certain politicians” (Google Incorporated, 2018b). The reasons officially cited vary — often they use defamation justifications — but the vignettes sometimes appear frivolous and motivated by political concerns.

## *II. Content Removal Patterns as Domestic Regulatory Choices*

The legality of the previous vignette from Italy transitions us from a theoretical framework drawn from motivations we often associate with authoritarian regimes into a broader conception of censorship that opens up new opportunities for theoretical and empirical work in political science. One of the most difficult questions

to grapple with when studying digital content removal is how to think about content control in democracies and what it means normatively. Democratic countries routinely request content be taken off search engines, video streaming services, remote servers, and so on. Many of these removal requests reflect relatively unobjectionable applications of domestic law. A normative dilemma, then, follows: must content removal motivations be normatively negative? I argue that by shifting the terms of our normative thinking about censorship, we can also productively shift political science's theoretical thinking about why democracies remove content. Without a fuller regulatory theory of how governments set binding property rights and rules on digital content, political science constrains the literatures that seem relevant to digital content restriction. Whole categories of content removal reasons are left understudied. By contrast, other scholarly fields, including digital communications (Breindl, 2013; DeNardis, 2012, 2014), law (Klonick, 2017), and sociology (Brousseau, Marzouki and Méadel, 2012) are much more attuned to the political mechanisms causing censorship with respect to governance and regulatory structures than political scientists.

Certainly, a straightforward way to think about content restriction and censorship in democracies is to view it in terms of economic interests, embedding the discussion in traditional political economic concerns. Domestic firms have huge incentives to pressure politicians and courts to remove content related to their intellectual property and, perhaps more importantly, to facilitate the construction of regulatory regimes that contain political and legal levers to remove content that are easily used by any politically powerful actor. Thinking about censorship as a form of domestic content regulatory regime shaped by firm-politician interactions, akin to the literature on trade barriers, opens the door for a plethora of studies beyond direct state security concerns. A cursory look at the reasons cited in the Google dataset, for example, bears this thinking out: business complaints, copyright, regulated goods and services, and trademarks are all salient removal reasons (Google Incorporated, 2018c).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, flipping the political economic agent of interest around, private points of control themselves are actors with a political context. They are quite susceptible to pressure from domestic

light a vignette of this nature to emphasize the point.

<sup>4</sup>And note that this discussion ignores the massive system of online copyrighted material removal created by private points of control that is used by domestic actors, which is set up in the shadow of government regulatory rules.

governments, and their behavior with respect to content may depend on their domestic characteristics, including physical capital investment, employment levels, or the size of potential domestic market opportunities.

Thinking about censorship as a form of domestic content regulatory regime shaped by firm-politician interactions, akin to the literature on trade barriers, opens the door for a plethora of studies beyond direct state security concerns.

More fundamentally, many takedowns are simply due to broadly agreed upon societal rights and rules about what content is legal: adult content, bullying, drug use, hate speech, and religious offenses, for example, frequently appear as categories of government requests sent to private points of control to censor content (Google Incorporated, 2018c). Still another plausible way to think about government censorship and content control systematically is in terms of governments setting the terms for how firms are allowed to use and display data more broadly. Pasquale (2015, p. 8), for example, describes the way that firms use algorithms to create reputation mechanisms that incorporate observable information in ways that may not be consistent with the public interest, what he calls “the secret judgments of software.” Privacy issues, too, provide credible legal reasons for governments to censor content from private points of control. Governments may differ from one another systematically on their positions on such issues, creating what Newman (2008) calls domestic “privacy regimes.” Governments may have a substantial regulatory role to play in determining what content can and cannot be revealed to other actors about the users of digital networks by shaping a content regulatory regime, which could even, in practice, resemble a form of systematic content removal — see, for example, the recent developments in the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation and its right to be forgotten (European Union, 2018). Critically, none of these reasons for censoring and removing content are easily understood with a raw state security motivation. Instead, these motivations suggest the importance of new theories that explain differences in country digital content regulatory regimes, a literature that might fit more comfortably into comparative or international political economy.

### III. Digital Censorship Going Forward

All of this is to say that while the literature on censorship and digital content control is highly developed in political science, it has developed in very specific theoretical directions and remains highly underspecified in other key directions. Remarkably, digital censorship represents an unusual comparative politics area where issues related to authoritarian regimes are much better explored and understood than in developed OECD contexts. I see the next frontier in the study of digital censorship lying in the further exploration of content removal as a systemic domestic phenomenon in developed democracies that is not necessarily motivated by state security but by other regulatory incentives demanded by politicians, citizens, and firms.

### References

- Allcott, Hunt and Matthew Gentzkow. 2017. “Social media and fake news in the 2016 Election.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2):211–235.
- Breindl, Yana. 2013. “Internet content regulation in liberal democracies: A literature review.” Working Papers zu Digital Humanities, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen.
- Brousseau, Eric, Meryem Marzouki and Cécile Méadel, eds. 2012. *Governance, Regulations and Powers on the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, Jidong and Yiqing Xu. 2017a. “Information manipulation and reform in authoritarian regimes.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 5(1):163–178.
- Chen, Jidong and Yiqing Xu. 2017b. “Why do authoritarian regimes allow citizens to voice their opinions publicly?” *Journal of Politics* 79(3):792–803.
- DeNardis, Laura. 2012. “Hidden levers of Internet control.” *Information, Communication and Society* 15(5):720–738.
- DeNardis, Laura. 2014. *The Global War for Internet Governance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- European Union. 2018. “The EU General Data Protection Regulation.” <https://eugdpr.org/>.
- Farrell, Henry. 2012. “The consequences of the Internet for politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15(1):35–52.
- Gallagher, Ryan. 2018. “Google plans to launch censored search engine in China, leaked documents reveal.” *The Intercept*, August 1.
- Google Incorporated. 2018a. “Transparency Report: India Request Vignettes.”
- Google Incorporated. 2018b. “Transparency Report: Italy Request Vignettes.”
- Google Incorporated. 2018c. “Transparency Report.”
- Gunitsky, Seva. 2015. “Corrupting the cyber-commons: So-

- cial media as a tool of autocratic stability.” *Perspectives on Politics* 13:42–54.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. “How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression.” *American Political Science Review* 107(2):326–343.
- Klonick, Kate. 2017. “The new governors: The people, rules and processes governing online speech.” 131 *Harvard Law Review* 1598.
- Meserve, Stephen A. and Daniel Pemstein. 2018. “Google politics: The political determinants of Internet censorship in democracies.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 6(2):245–263.
- Newman, Abraham. 2008. *Protectors of Privacy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Pasquale, Frank. 2015. *The Black Box Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Roberts, Margaret E. 2018. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2017. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. 2017. *Tiwtter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Zittrain, J. 2003. “Internet points of control.” *Boston College Law Review* 44:653–688.

## How to Measure Information Manipulation?

by [Arturas Rozenas](#)  
New York University  
and [Denis Stukal](#)  
New York University

The scholarship on information manipulation by governments has grown explosively in recent years. Employing unique datasets with innovative analytical techniques ([King, Pan and Roberts, 2013, 2017](#); [Sanovich, Stukal and Tucker, 2018](#)) and clever experimental designs ([King, Pan and Roberts, 2014](#); [Huang, 2015a,b](#)), scholars have documented a variety of ways in which information is manipulated on traditional or social media.

In many ways, this recent scholarship marks a major productive break with the older approaches that used off-the-shelf generic media freedom indices provided by Freedom House or Reporters Without Borders. At the same time, this increased use of ‘boutique’

datasets and methods resulted in a proliferation of diverse, domain-specific empirical results that are difficult to systematize and extend in a comparative fashion. One important road-block in building a truly comparative literature on this topic is the lack of replicable and transportable measures of information manipulation.

Here, in part drawing on our article in the *Journal of Politics* ([Rozenas and Stukal, Forthcoming](#)), we present a typology of information manipulation strategies and outline several simple methods to measure them. To illustrate the proposed approaches, we apply them to study how Russian state-controlled television manipulates information about economic affairs.

### I. Varieties of Information Manipulation

When designing operational measures of information manipulation, it is important to distinguish information manipulation from the more generic concept of *media bias*. The latter concept refers to the political partiality of the media. In contrast, information manipulation refers to the *actions* that the media takes to process and communicate information. A media source could be biased even without having manipulated information: for example, a newspaper could engage in fully accurate reporting, but nonetheless display a bias by endorsing a particular political party ([Chiang and Knight, 2011](#)) or by citing commentaries by a partial interest group ([Grosseclose and Milyo, 2005](#)). Chinese or Russian state-controlled media, for example, are clearly biased towards their respective governments, but this fact alone does not tell us how precisely those media actually manipulate information, especially information that does not directly concern the government.

Information can be manipulated in multiple ways. To build a systematic typology, we distinguish between hard and soft information manipulation (see Table 1). When the media misrepresents basic factual information like the incidence of protests, the degree of economic growth, or the support for the government in the population, it is engaging in hard information manipulation. One form of hard information manipulation is *censorship*, which occurs when the facts that are bad news for the government are not disclosed to the public ([Shadmehr and Bernhardt, 2015](#)). Another form of hard information manipulation is *distortion*, which occurs when the factual information is disclosed, but the content of that information is distorted by turning bad

Table 1: A Typology of Information Manipulation Strategies

<b>Hard Manipulation</b>	
Censorship	Bad news not disclosed
Distortion	Bad news substituted with good news
<b>Soft Manipulation</b>	
Distraction (signal-jamming)	Bad news augmented with noise
Selective attribution (framing)	News attributed selectively to shift blame and claim credit

news into good news (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). In both of these cases, the manipulator’s goal is to misrepresent ‘hard’ factual information about basic and potentially verifiable events or processes.

In contrast, soft information manipulation concerns how media presents and interprets factually correct information. One form of soft information manipulation is *signal-jamming*, which occurs when the media presents facts accurately but diverts attention away from them by flooding the environment with distracting information (noise). De Angelis and Vecchiato (2018) show how Italian media under Silvio Berlusconi diverted attention from politics in difficult times by putting more emphasis on entertainment. King, Pan and Roberts (2017) show how the Chinese government distracts citizens from critical debates of its policies on social media.

Another form of soft information manipulation is *selective attribution* — the framing of news that aims to attribute the reported facts selectively to shift blame for bad news and to claim credit for good news. For example, when the economy is doing poorly, instead of hiding this fact from the public or lying about it, the government-controlled media could admit that the economy is doing poorly, but blame this fact on external adversaries (Frye, Forthcoming). Whereas hard manipulation concerns how the media represents first-order facts (e.g., “U.S. stock market hits record highs”), selective attribution concerns how the media explains the causes of those facts (e.g., “U.S. stock market has hit record highs because of President Trump’s actions”).

It is somewhat surprising that soft information, and in particular selective attribution, has received little at-

tention in academic debates. From a historical perspective, selective attribution has featured prominently in the writings of the most successful architects of state propaganda systems. Lenin, for example, wrote that “The propagandist dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalist nature of the crisis, the causes of its inevitability in modern society” (Kenez, 1985, 7). The guidelines of the Nazi Propaganda Committee directed that their propaganda efforts “have one supreme principle: to take truth and only truth as the foundation of our propaganda” (Propaganda Abteilung, 1927). Instead of distorting facts, as Joseph Goebbels (1931) emphasized on several occasions, successful propaganda should aim to interpret those facts — even facts that are bad news — in a way that fits the political ideology of the propagandist.

Given the increasing diversity of information sources available to citizens, governments are likely to be increasingly restricted in their capacity to censor and distort information without being caught. Given these growing constraints on hard information manipulation, we would expect to see more emphasis on the soft methods information manipulation, which makes it especially important to be able to measure them.

## II. Measurement Strategies

We now describe several intuitive methods to measure censorship, distortion, and selective attribution.<sup>1</sup> These methods are *reproducible* in the sense that they do not rely on a subjective judgement of the researcher and they can be independently replicated, at least approximately. They are also *transportable* in that they can be used across different languages. Finally, these methods are *scalable* since they allow us to measure information

<sup>1</sup> For interesting methods to measure distraction, see De Angelis and Vecchiato (2018) and King, Pan and Roberts (2017).



manipulation at various unit levels — country, country-year, or media source. As will become apparent, the limitation of these methods is that they are mostly applicable for tracing information manipulation as it relates to economic affairs.

**Measuring censorship.** A model of news censorship measurement is shown in Figure 1. The horizontal axis represents an event that a researcher can measure independently from the news media. The event could represent a change in the country's stock index, a change in the value of the national currency, or a change in the inflation rate. In any type of media, we would expect that major fluctuations in the economy — whether they are good news (the stock market went up) or bad news (the stock market went down) — should attract more attention in the media than minor fluctuations. In other words, the coverage curve showing the relationship between the nature of the news item and its coverage in the media should be non-monotonic — higher in the tails and lower in the middle.

The precise relationship between the news sentiment and its coverage should depend, in a predictable way, on the nature of the media. In an impartial media, big bad news should be covered with the same intensity as big good news — we should observe a symmetric U-shaped curve of coverage. If the media is censored, then big bad news should be covered with a lower intensity than big good news — we should expect to see a J-shaped relationship between the news sentiment and its coverage. Importantly, the media could also be 'negatively biased' and pay more attention to the bad news than the good news, resulting in a reverse J-shaped coverage curve shown in Figure 1. Such negative biases exist in some western media sources due to the greater commercial value of bad news relative to good news (Soroka, 2006).

Having identified whether each given piece of news is reported in the media, we can estimate the coverage curves empirically using a flexible regression specification (we show how one could identify news coverage and estimate coverage curves in an example below). An estimated coverage curve that is J-shaped would indicate news censorship. Conversely, if the estimated coverage curve is either U-shaped (symmetric) or is a mirror image of a J-shaped curve, it would indicate that the news media is unlikely to be censored. One could perhaps counter that even the media with a U-

shaped coverage curve is censored because it reports fewer bad news items than Western democratic media. This does not seem to be a proper benchmark, because the primary reason for the negative biases in western democratic media are mostly related to commercial interests, not political interventions. To the extent that a censorship measure should capture the manipulation of the news that has its origins in politics, the 'impartial' media is conceptually a more appropriate benchmark.

**Measuring distortion.** A measurement model for news distortion is depicted in Figure 2. On the horizontal axis, as in the case of censorship measurement, we have the news — events that can be measured independently of the media source — arranged on the continuum from very bad news to very good news. On the vertical axis, we have the *coverage sentiment* — how negatively or positively the given news is covered in the media. Thus, to measure news distortion, we first need to identify whether a given news item is covered in the media, and then evaluate the sentiment of that coverage. We discuss the techniques that can be used to implement these steps in the application example below.

In an impartial media that does not distort news, there should be a close correspondence between the sentiment of the news and its coverage in the media. In a media that does distort news, the bad news would be represented as good news, which would result in a weak correspondence between how good or bad news items are and how they are covered in the media. In totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union or North Korea where the media almost uniformly broadcasts rosy depictions of economic life (Mickiewicz, 1990), there should be little if any relationship between the true sentiment of the events and how they are reported in the media. As in the censorship analysis, these relationships could be estimated using a flexible regression specification.

**Measuring selective attribution.** To measure hard manipulation of information, one has to compare the ground facts — measured independently of the media — to their coverage in the media. Measuring soft manipulation is fundamentally different because it requires us to identify systematic variation in the narratives around the news that the media actually reports. The soft manipulation of information is not about the correspondence between facts and their coverage in the media, but rather about how the media *explains* the factual claims it is making — whether true or false. In this

Figure 1: A Model of Censorship

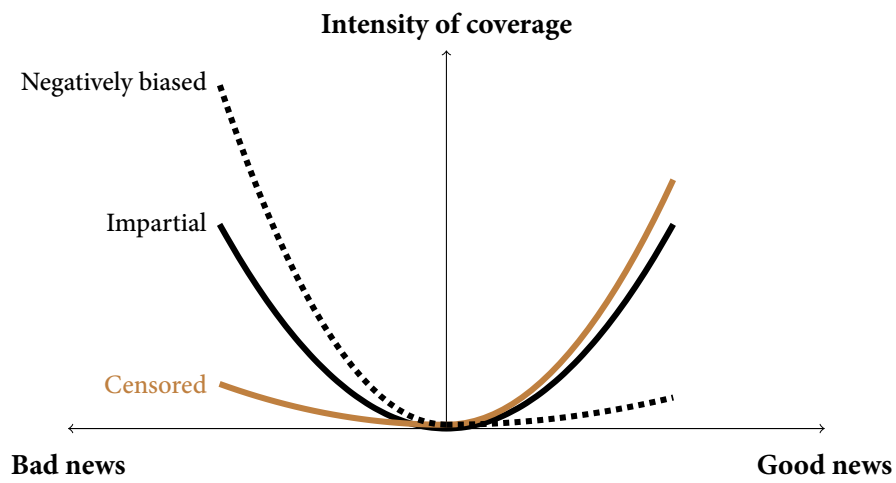
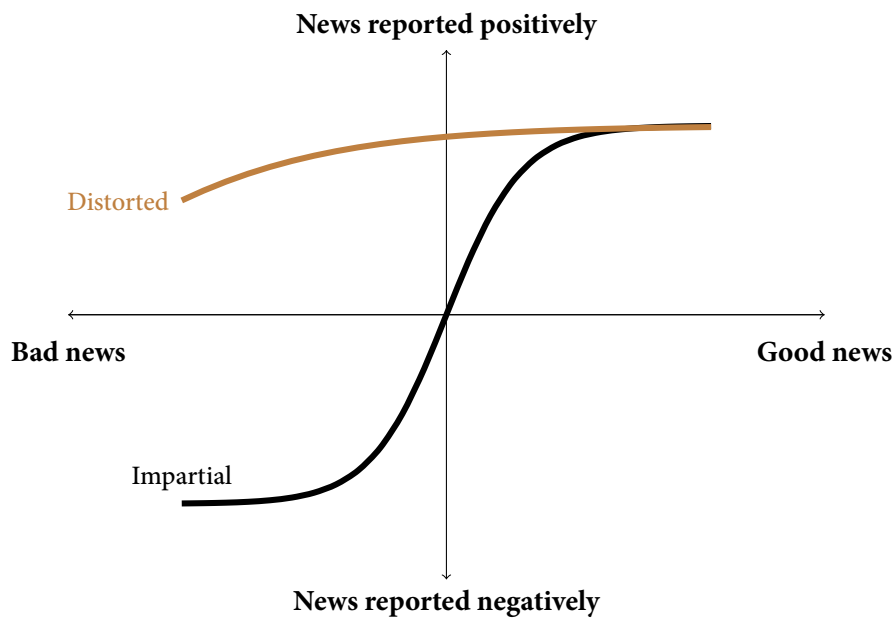


Figure 2: A Model of Distortion



sense, measuring soft manipulation requires less information than measuring hard manipulation because we do not need information about the hard facts and can rely only on the media reports.

However, measuring soft manipulation leads to other types of challenges. To measure this quantity, one needs to identify whether a given news report contains information about an event that can be construed as good news or bad news and also identify the causes to which the given event is attributed. This is a complicated problem that is quite difficult to solve using fully automated text analysis tools. However, to the extent that the media has an objective to persuade its consumers about the causal attributions of the reported news, it should not be a difficult cognitive task for a human being to identify how a given media text attributes the events and processes reported therein.

Remarkably, throughout the 17 year period, barely any bad news was attributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin, whereas about a quarter of all good news was attributed directly to Putin's policies and actions. In stark contrast, we see that disproportionately more bad news than good news was attributed to the actions of foreign powers.

Recent methodological research shows that coding tasks can be effectively outsourced to 'crowds' of online workers, who produce fast, accurate, and replicable coding judgments (Benoit et al., 2016). To measure selective attribution through crowdsourcing, one needs to present coders with a short snippet of a text and ask them to answer sequentially two multiple choice questions: First, does the text report an event or a process that represents good or bad news? Second, to which person or institution is that event or process attributed? The list of categories of attribution could be predefined by a researcher depending on the substantive context and research question, or it could be left as an open-ended question.

### III. Application to Russian State-Controlled Television

To illustrate how the proposed measures work in a real life example, we apply them to the coverage of economic news on Russia's largest state-controlled televi-

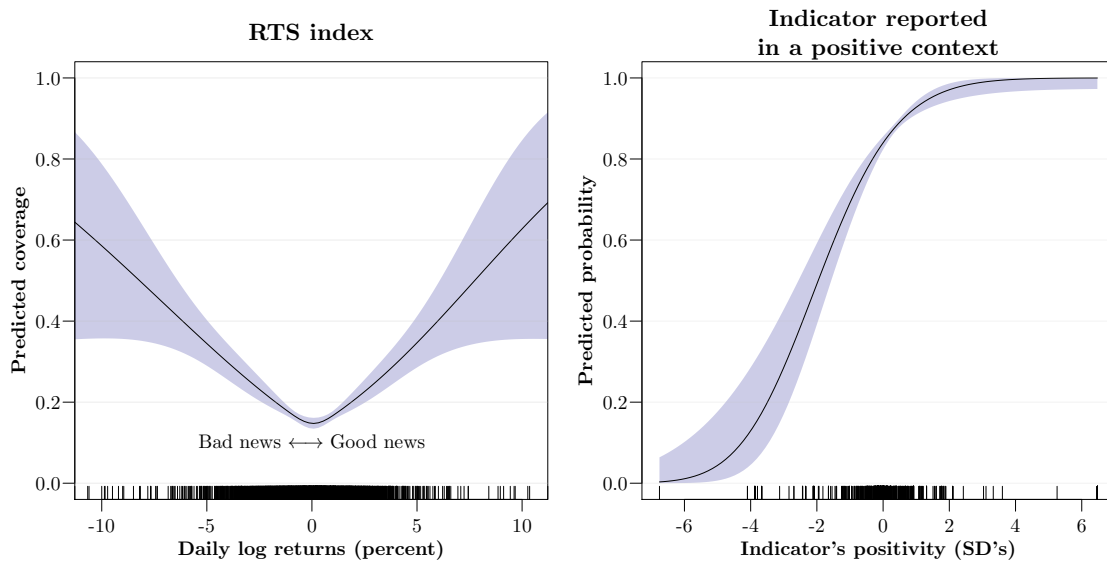
sion *Channel 1*. We base our analyses on 305,061 daily news reports from January 1999 to July 2016 that we obtained from the channel's online news archive. Our main objective is to evaluate how much Russian state-controlled television censors, distorts, or selectively attributes economic news.

To measure hard manipulation, we consider how *Channel 1* covers short-term shocks in various objectively measurable economic fundamentals that include Moscow's stock exchange index (RTS); the exchange rate of Russia's national currency, the ruble; the price of its main natural resource, oil; and the consumer price inflation rate. As an example, we examine whether *Channel 1* talks about the Russian stock market more on the days when the market is performing well relative to when it is performing poorly. More concretely, we estimate a flexible probit regression where the dependent variable is equal to one if the media reports on the stock market on a given day, and zero otherwise. The independent variable is the daily return in the RTS index on that same day.

As shown in the left panel in Figure 3, the coverage curve for the RTS index is nonmonotonic, as suggested in the measurement model. More importantly, the coverage of the stock market on *Channel 1* is remarkably symmetric. The channel is as likely to talk about Russia's stock market on days when it performs poorly as on days when it performs very well. The symmetric shape of the coverage curve suggests no evidence of news censorship. In our article, we show that very similar conclusions follow from our analyses of other economic indicators like price inflation or the currency exchange rate.

Does *Channel 1* distort economic news? According to our proposed distortion measurement model, to answer this question, we need to measure the sentiment with which a given news topic is covered. We identified the set of news reports that cover the four economic fundamentals and then asked coders on the *Crowd-Flower* platform to indicate whether the text covers a given economic indicator in positive or negative light. For example, in case the text covers the RTS index, the coders would be asked: "Does the report talk about the Russian stock market in a positive or negative context?" We then fit a flexible probit regression where the outcome variable is equal to one if the indicator is covered in a positive context, and the independent variable is

Figure 3: News Censorship and Distortion on Russian Television



Note: The panel on the left shows predicted probabilities that the news on the Russian stock market is covered conditional on the daily returns of the RTS stock index. The panel on the right shows predicted probabilities that an indicator is reported in a positive context conditional on the indicator's positivity. The shaded regions represent 95 percent confidence bounds.

the actual positivity of the indicator.

The right panel in Figure 3 shows the results of this regression analysis. It shows the predicted probabilities that an economic indicator is reported in a positive context conditional on its actual positivity. When an indicator was performing positively, *Channel 1* tended to report on that indicator in a positive manner. More importantly, the channel covered the indicator in a negative light when the indicator's performance was negative. Based on our distortion measurement model, these empirical patterns do not indicate that *Channel 1* distorts economic news.

Finally, we consider whether *Channel 1* engages in systematic selective attribution of economic news. To measure selective attribution, we first identified 13,173 news fragments that primarily concern Russia's domestic economic affairs. We then took a random sample of 6,706 news fragments and submitted them to 544 Russian-speaking coders on the *CrowdFlower* platform. The coders were asked to identify whether a news fragment contains information about an event or a process that is good news or bad news for the Russian economy. The coders also had to indicate whether the news report attributes that event or process to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russian authorities and officials other than Putin, foreign governments, or the foreign economy and foreign businesses. The article discusses

further details of how we implemented the coding procedure and how we aggregated the judgements of the coders.

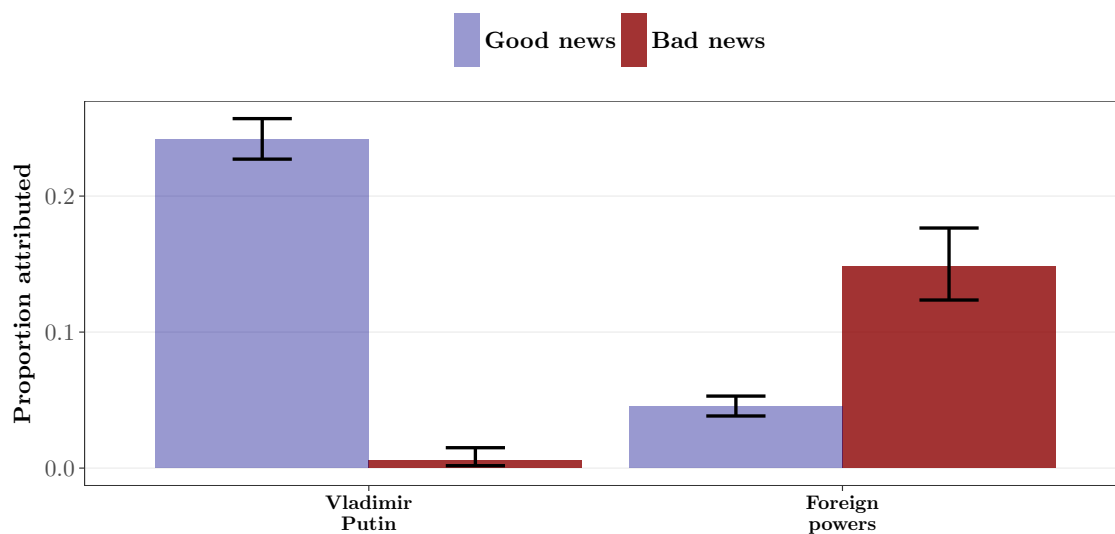
Figure 4 shows a snapshot of the results reported in our article. It displays the proportion of news attributed to Vladimir Putin and foreign powers on *Channel 1*, depending on whether these were good news or bad news. Remarkably, throughout the 17 year period, barely any bad news was attributed to Russian president Vladimir Putin, whereas about a quarter of all good news was attributed directly to Putin's policies and actions. In stark contrast, we see that disproportionately more bad news than good news was attributed to the actions of foreign powers. In our article, we show similar patterns of highly selective attribution of news with respect to other actors and institutions. In sum, it appears that *Channel 1* does not manipulate economic information by hiding or distorting economic facts; instead, it engages in a systematic manipulation regarding the causal interpretation of those facts.

#### IV. Conclusion

Recognizing that information manipulation can take various forms, we have proposed a few simple methods to measure information censorship, distortion, and selective attribution. Our application of these measurement strategies to the case of Russia has shown that



Figure 4: Attribution of Economic News on Russian Television



Note: The bars show sample proportions of the news directly attributed to each of the four categories, with 95 percent confidence intervals.

government-controlled television does not shy away from reporting on economic events that could easily be construed as bad news for the Russian government. Instead of hiding or distorting these news items, the state controlled television puts a lot of effort into interpreting these news items in a way that benefits the government.

The most fruitful next quantum leap in this literature would be to move from current domain-specific anatomical studies to comparative studies; that is, to move from studies showing how a particular government at a particular point in time manipulates information using a particular method to studies that illuminate how information manipulation strategies vary across different domains and why. Clearly, this kind of comparative research is only possible if replicable and transportable measures of different information manipulation strategies are available. Hopefully, the conceptual distinctions and their measurement strategies presented here will be useful in addressing this issue.

## References

- Benoit, Kenneth, Drew Conway, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, Michael Laver and Slava Mikhaylov. 2016. "Crowd-sourced text analysis: Reproducible and agile production of political data." *American Political Science Review* 110(2):278–295.
- Chiang, Chun-Fang and Brian Knight. 2011. "Media bias and influence: Evidence from newspaper endorsements." *Review of Economic Studies* 78(3):795–820.
- De Angelis, Andrea and Alessandro Vecchiato. 2018. "Panem et circenses: The persuasive effect of soft news in Berlusconi's Italy." Unpublished manuscript, New York University.
- Frye, Timothy. Forthcoming. "Economic sanctions and public opinion: Survey experiments from Russia." *Comparative Political Studies*.
- Gehlbach, Scott and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. "Government control of the media." *Journal of Public Economics* 118:163–171.
- Goebbels, Joseph. 1931. "Will and Way."
- Groseclose, Tim and Jeffrey Milyo. 2005. "A measure of media bias." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120(4):1191–1237.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015a. "International knowledge and domestic evaluations in a changing society: The case of China." *American Political Science Review* 109(3):613–634.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015b. "Propaganda as signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47(4):419–444.
- Kenez, Peter. 1985. *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression." *American Political Science Review* 107(2):326–343.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. 2014. "Reverse-engineering censorship in China: Randomized experimentation and participant observation." *Science* 345(6199):1251–1252.

- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. 2017. "How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument." *American Political Science Review* 111(3):484–501.
- Mickiewicz, Ellen P. 1990. *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Propaganda Abteilung. 1927. *Propaganda*. Reichs-Parteileitung der N.S.D.A.P.
- Rozenas, Arturas and Denis Stukal. Forthcoming. "How autocrats manipulate economic news: Evidence from Russia's state-controlled television." *Journal of Politics*.
- Sanovich, Sergey, Denis Stukal and Joshua A Tucker. 2018. "Turning the virtual tables: Government strategies for addressing online opposition with an application to Russia." *Comparative Politics* 50(3):435–482.
- Shadmehr, Mehdi and Dan Bernhardt. 2015. "State censorship." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 7(2):280–307.
- Soroka, Stuart N. 2006. "Good news and bad news: Asymmetric responses to economic information." *Journal of Politics* 68(2):372–385.

## Conspiracy Theories: An Agenda for Comparative Political Science

by Joseph Uscinski  
University of Miami

Conspiracy theories have become a prime concern for social scientists. Top political science journals and presses have begun publishing studies addressing the topic (Enders, Smallpage and Lupton, Forthcoming; Miller, Saunders and Farhart, 2016; Oliver and Wood, 2014, 2018; Uscinski, 2018). Once thought to be fringe ideas, conspiracy theories are now widely recognized as being intertwined with policy and politics (Miller and Saunders, 2016).

Psychologists and social-psychologists (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka, 2017), historians (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017), philosophers (Dentith, 2017), sociologists (Nefes, 2015), and economists (Leiser, Duani and Wagner-Egger, 2017) have all begun to pay more attention to conspiracy theories, particularly since 2007. Researching conspiracy theories is truly an interdisciplinary venture, and political science — being a borrowing discipline — has much to learn from, and contribute to, the work being done by scholars in other fields.

Comparative political scientists are particularly needed to widen the geographic scope of the existing literature. While scholars have noticed that conspiracy theories are just as prevalent in other regions of the world, the majority of attention given to conspiracy theories focuses on the United States and other Western contexts (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Below, I provide six recommendations for scholars embarking on a research trajectory that examines conspiracy theories. My goal here is to first encourage comparative and area studies scholars to begin studying conspiracy theories in areas outside of the United States. In doing so, I point to some of the foundational and cutting edge work both inside and outside of political science and the questions and controversies that remain. Second, in pointing out some common hurdles in the study of conspiracy theories, I wish to suggest how scholars might overcome them.

### I. Defining Terms and Concepts

For several reasons, it isn't always clear what counts as a conspiracy theory and what doesn't (Bost, 2018; Walker, 2018). For one, people who believe in a conspiracy theory often don't like labelling it as such because they believe it's true, and therefore an actual conspiracy (Levy, 2017). Telling conspiracy theories (the could-be-true) from conspiracies (the-are-true) requires that researchers present clear grounds for making the epistemological decisions that they do (Dentith, 2018). There is a burgeoning literature addressing the epistemology of conspiracy theories that political scientists should consult.

Some epistemologists are more dismissive of conspiracy theories (Mandik, 2007; Popper, 1966, 1972) than others (Dentith, 2016, 2017; Pigden, 1995; Rääkkä and Basham, 2018). Epistemologists present varying standards for judging the veracity of conspiracy theories (Buenting and Taylor, 2010; Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999). With this said, I recommend Neil Levy's demarcation between conspiracy theory and conspiracy: that we should believe the judgements of properly constituted epistemological authorities when attempting to separate fact from fiction (Levy, 2007). Nonetheless, conspiracy theories are generally unfalsifiable and this gives believers the ability to wriggle around refutation (Boudry and Braeckman, 2011).

Researchers should be clear about their concepts

and use appropriate terminology. Along with conspiracy theories, topics such as misinformation, misperceptions, fake news, and rumors have become important topics of study (Berinsky, 2017; Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler, 2017; Jost et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; McCright and Dunlap, 2017; van der Linden et al., 2017). While these concepts would overlap in a Venn diagram (Difonzo, 2018), they are not necessarily the same thing.

## II. Thinking and Beliefs

When a person indicates that they believe that a particular conspiracy theory is true, we say that they hold a conspiracy belief. When a person has an underlying outlook in which shadowy conspiracies frequently dictate events and circumstances, we say that a person engages in conspiracy thinking (Uscinski, 2018). It is important to differentiate between specific beliefs and underlying thinking because they likely have different causes and manifest themselves in different ways (Enders, Smallpage and Lupton, Forthcoming). Conspiracy thinking appears to not only drive belief in specific conspiracy theories (Carey et al., 2016; Edelson et al., 2017; Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson, 2016), but also predicts attitudes towards policy and science (Marietta and Barker, 2018; Uscinski and Olivella, 2017). If a person is predisposed towards believing conspiracy theories, their other predispositions, including partisanship (McClosky and Chong, 1985; Smallpage, Enders and Uscinski, 2017), religious views (Newheiser, Farias and Tausch, 2011), and racial attitudes (Pasek et al., 2015), will drive which specific conspiracy theories a person will then adopt.

An important point is that there are countless conspiracy theories, some of which gain sizable followings but others of which pop-up and then quickly disappear. Conspiracy theories address a range of topics, and as such appeal to different groups of people. Therefore, it is potentially perilous to make generalizations about conspiracy beliefs from studying belief in just one or a few conspiracy theories. In other words, the term conspiracy theory is a big bucket, and explaining the contents of that bucket requires general explanations based upon broad studies.

## III. Context Matters

Some researchers are looking at conspiracy beliefs outside of the West (Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017; Ny-

han and Zeitzoff, Forthcoming; Siddiqui, Forthcoming), but such efforts are just beginning. Beliefs are often dependent on context, therefore comparative research and research outside of Western countries is absolutely necessary. For example, in contexts in which institutions should generally be believed, conspiracy theories are generally unwarranted. But in contexts in which institutions generally should not be believed, conspiracy theories might be entirely rational.

Journalists, in particular, make a lot of faulty assumptions about conspiracy theories ... For example, nearly every year journalists claim that 'conspiracy theorizing has hit a high-water mark'. This can't always be true ... Scholars beginning to study conspiracy theories should be aware that much of what they read in the media about conspiracy theories may not have much evidence behind it, not unlike conspiracy theories themselves.

Researchers would do well to specify which contextual factors affect conspiracy beliefs and thinking. For example, how do inequality, the economic system, the form of government, the number of political parties, varying degrees of press freedom, the predominant theology, and history affect people's willingness to accept conspiracy theories? Researchers do not yet have much to say about the effect of context, and even less to say about conspiracy theories in the context of closed states. If conspiracy theories represent a rejection of establishment knowledge, how do the value and meaning of conspiracy theories change when the establishment is corrupt?

The way that researchers measure important concepts may not work very well across varying contexts. Conspiracy thinking, for example, is measured by scales that have largely been tested in only Western contexts (Brotherton, French and Pickering, 2013). While some scales have been validated across borders (Bruder et al., 2013; Lantian et al., 2016), most have not been tested outside of Western democracies. For example, one scale asks about views toward inclusivity in government and democracy (Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson, 2016); how would such measures be useful in North Korea or even Russia? These are questions that researchers need

to explore.

#### IV. Conspiracy Theories and Institutions

Much of the concern about conspiracy theories has focused on why people believe them (Uscinski, 2018). This is partly due to the influence of psychologists and their focus on internal mechanisms; but this is also due to the fact that most of the political elites in the states where conspiracy theories are studied eschew (or at least eschewed) conspiracy theories. Thus, there is little scholarship examining the influence of conspiracy theories on institutions, how elites use conspiracy theories, and how conspiracy theories can influence institutional actors during policy-making processes.

Some attempts have been made to examine conspiracy rhetoric by legislators in the UK (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017) and in Turkey (Nefes, 2018). Scholars of the former Soviet-space (Radnitz, 2016, 2018) and Latin America (Filer, 2018) have examined how elites at different levels use conspiracy theories to manipulate the masses. But for the most part, the role of leaders has largely been ignored in the study of conspiracy theories. Comparative political scientists are needed to understand how, why, and when conspiracy theories enter into elite discourse, as this is critically important.

How conspiracy theories drive policy is also an area ripe for exploration. It is not clear what role conspiracy theories play — in some instances they may drive policy, but in other instances conspiracy theories may be used to rationalize policy. This holds for social and political movements as well. Conspiracy theories are often intertwined with mass movements, but it is not yet clear what role they play in motivating collective action.

#### V. The Dispersion of Conspiracy Theories

It is often assumed that conspiracy theories spread indiscriminately, particularly on the Internet and social media. But, there isn't much evidence or reasoning to back up such assumptions, and there are plenty of reasons to doubt that the Internet has increased conspiracy theorizing (Clarke, 2007; Uscinski, DeWitt and Atkinson, 2018). It is therefore important for scholars to examine the role of the Internet in driving conspiracy theories in different contexts. A good place to start is for researchers to consider theoretical models of how

messages spread (DeWitt, Atkinson and Wegner, 2018), and then test the explanatory power of those models in varying contexts.

#### VI. Dubious Claims about Dubious Claims

Journalists, in particular, make a lot of faulty assumptions about conspiracy theories. This can be forgiven somewhat, because they are on a deadline and there is not always scholarship available to answer every question that interests journalists. For example, nearly every year journalists claim that 'conspiracy theorizing has hit a high-water mark'. This can't always be true. Journalists also overestimate the number of people who belong to fringe conspiracy movements: for example, many news outlets claimed that the QAnon movement was becoming big and scary, but evidence shows the exact opposite (Uscinski and Klofstad, 2018). Journalists also often claim, without much evidence, that the Internet has increased conspiracy theorizing, that conspiracy theorizing is pathological, and that conspiracy theories are confined largely to the political right. Scholars beginning to study conspiracy theories should be aware that much of what they read in the media about conspiracy theories may not have much evidence behind it, not unlike conspiracy theories themselves. In other words, the topic of conspiracy theories is important enough on its own that scholars need not resort to repeating unsubstantiated claims to justify their research.

#### VII. Conclusion

The study of conspiracy theories is interdisciplinary, but centered largely in Western contexts. There are many disputes to settle in the current literature, and many questions to answer that are of practical value: Are conspiracy theories markers of extremism and violence? How can conspiracy theories be refuted? How can institutions improve information environments? How can citizens make better decisions with better information? Comparative political scientists are needed to collect a broader array of data than is currently available and to more broadly test theories in a variety of contexts.

#### References

- Berinsky, Adam J. 2017. "Rumors and health care reform: experiments in political misinformation." *British Journal of Political Science* 47(2):241–262.
- Bost, P. R. 2018. The truth is around here somewhere: In-



- tegrating the research on conspiracy beliefs. In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Boudry, Maarten and Johan Braeckman. 2011. "Immunizing strategies and epistemic defense mechanisms." *Philosophia* 39(1):145–161.
- Brotherton, Robert, Christopher C. French and Alan D. Pickering. 2013. "Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: The generic conspiracist beliefs scale." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4:279.
- Bruder, Martin, Peter Haffke, Nick Neave, Nina Nouripanah and Roland Imhoff. 2013. "Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy mentality questionnaire." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4:225.
- Buenting, Joel and Jason Taylor. 2010. "Conspiracy theories and fortuitous data." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 40(4):567–578.
- Carey, John M., Brendan Nyhan, Benjamin Valentino and Mingnan Liu. 2016. "An inflated view of the facts? How preferences and predispositions shape conspiracy beliefs about the Deflategate scandal." *Research & Politics* 3(3).
- Clarke, Steve. 2002. "Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32(2):131–150.
- Clarke, Steve. 2007. "Conspiracy theories and the Internet: Controlled demolition and arrested development." *Episteme* 4(2):167–180.
- Dentith, Matthew R. X. 2018. Conspiracy theories and philosophy: Bringing the epistemology of a freighted term into the social sciences. In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dentith, Matthew R.X. 2016. "When inferring to a conspiracy might be the best explanation." *Social Epistemology* 30(5-6):572–591.
- Dentith, Matthew R.X. 2017. "Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence." *Synthese* pp. 1–19.
- DeWitt, Darin, Matthew Atkinson and Drew Wegner. 2018. "How conspiracy theories spread." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Difonzo, Nicholas. 2018. "Conspiracy rumor psychology." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka. 2017. "The psychology of conspiracy theories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26(6):538–542.
- Edelson, Jack, Alexander Alduncin, Christopher Krewson, James A. Sieja and Joseph E. Uscinski. 2017. "The effect of conspiratorial thinking and motivated reasoning on belief in election fraud." *Political Research Quarterly* 70(4):933–946.
- Enders, Adam M., Steven M. Smallpage and Robert N. Lupton. Forthcoming. "Are all 'birthers' conspiracy theorists? On the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and political orientations." *British Journal of Political Science*.
- Filer, Tanya. 2018. "The hidden and the revealed: Styles of political conspiracy theory in Kirchnerism." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Flynn, D.J., Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. 2017. "The nature and origins of misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics." *Political Psychology* 38:127–150.
- Greenhill, Kelly M. and Ben Oppenheim. 2017. "Rumor has it: The adoption of unverified information in conflict zones." *International Studies Quarterly* 61(3):660–676.
- Jost, John T., Sander van der Linden, Costas Panagopoulos and Curtis D. Hardin. 2018. "Ideological asymmetries in conformity, desire for shared reality, and the spread of misinformation." *Current Opinion in Psychology* (23):77–83.
- Keeley, Brian L. 1999. "Of conspiracy theories." *Journal of Philosophy* 96(3):109–126.
- Lantian, Anthony, Dominique Muller, Cécile Nurra and Karen M. Douglas. 2016. "Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: Validation of a French and English single-item scale." *International Review of Social Psychology* 29(1):1–14.
- Lazer, David M.J., Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild et al. 2018. "The science of fake news." *Science* 359(6380):1094–1096.
- Leiser, David, Nofar Duani and Pascal Wagner-Egger. 2017. "The conspiratorial style in lay economic thinking." *PLoS ONE* 12(3).
- Levy, Neil. 2007. "Radically socialized knowledge and conspiracy theories." *Episteme* 4(2):181–192.
- Levy, Neil. 2017. "Due deference to denialism: Explaining ordinary people's rejection of established scientific findings." *Synthese* pp. 1–15.
- Mandik, Pete. 2007. "Shit happens." *Episteme* 4(2):205–218.
- Marietta, Morgan and David C. Barker. 2018. "Conspiratorial thinking and polarized fact perceptions." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McClosky, Herbert and Dennis Chong. 1985. "Similarities and differences between left-wing and right-wing radicals." *British Journal of Political Science* 15(3):329–363.
- McCright, Aaron M. and Riley E. Dunlap. 2017. "Combating misinformation requires recognizing its types and the factors that facilitate its spread and resonance." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6(4):389–396.
- McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew and Rolf Fredheim. 2017. "Cock-ups and slap-downs: A quantitative analysis of conspiracy rhetoric in the British Parliament 1916–2015." *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 50(3):156–169.

- Miller, Joanne M. and Kyle L. Saunders. 2016. "Conspiracy theories in the United States: More commonplace than extraordinary." *Critical Review* 28(1):127–136.
- Miller, Joanne M., Kyle L. Saunders and Christina E. Farhart. 2016. "Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: The moderating roles of political knowledge and trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4):824–844.
- Nefes, Trkay Salim. 2015. "Scrutinizing impacts of conspiracy theories on readers' political views: A rational choice perspective on anti-semitic rhetoric in Turkey." *British Journal of Sociology* 66(3):557–575.
- Nefes, Trkay Salim. 2018. "The conspiratorial style in Turkish politics: Discussing the deep state in the parliament." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Newheiser, Anna-Kaisa, Miguel Farias and Nicole Tausch. 2011. "The functional nature of conspiracy beliefs: Examining the underpinnings of belief in the Da Vinci Code conspiracy." *Personality and Individual Differences* 51(8):1007–1011.
- Nyhan, Brendan and Thomas Zeitzoff. Forthcoming. "Conspiracy and misperception belief in the Middle East and North Africa." *Journal of Politics*.
- Oliver, J. Eric and Thomas J. Wood. 2014. "Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4):952–966.
- Oliver, J. Eric and Thomas J. Wood. 2018. *Enchanted America: How Intuition and Reason Divide Our Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pasek, Josh, Tobias H. Stark, Jon A. Krosnick and Trevor Tompson. 2015. "What motivates a conspiracy theory? Birther beliefs, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and anti-Black attitudes." *Electoral Studies* 40:482–489.
- Pigden, Charles. 1995. "Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25(1):3–34.
- Popper, Sir Karl R. 1966. *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 2: The High Tide of Profecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*. 5th ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Popper, Sir Karl R. 1972. *Conjectures and Refutations*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Radnitz, Scott. 2016. "Paranoia with a purpose: Conspiracy theory and political coalitions in Kyrgyzstan." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32(5):474–489.
- Radnitz, Scott. 2018. "Why the powerful (in weak states) prefer conspiracy theories." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rikk, Juha and Lee Basham. 2018. "Conspiracy theory phobia." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Siddiqui, Niloufer. Forthcoming. "Who do you believe? Political parties and conspiracy theories in Pakistan." *Party Politics*.
- Smallpage, Steven M., Adam M. Enders and Joseph E. Uscinski. 2017. "The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs." *Research & Politics* 4(4).
- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Casey Klofstad. 2018. "New poll: The QAnon conspiracy movement is very unpopular." *Washington Post*, September 3.
- Uscinski, Joseph E., Casey Klofstad and Matthew Atkinson. 2016. "Why do people believe in conspiracy theories? The role of informational cues and predispositions." *Political Research Quarterly* 69:57–71.
- Uscinski, Joseph E., Darin DeWitt and Matthew Atkinson. 2018. "Conspiracy theories and the Internet." In *The Brill Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* eds. Egil Asprem, Asbjorn Dyrendal and David Robinson: Brill.
- Uscinski, Joseph E., ed. 2018. *Conspiracy Theories and the People who Believe Them*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Joseph M. Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Santiago Olivella. 2017. "The conditional effect of conspiracy thinking on attitudes toward climate change." *Research & Politics* 4(4).
- van der Linden, Sander, Edward Maibach, John Cook, Anthony Leiserowitz and Stephan Lewandowsky. 2017. "Inoculating against misinformation." *Science* 358(6367):1141–1142.
- Walker, Jesse. 2018. "What we mean when we say 'conspiracy theory'." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Dearth and Distortion in Dictators' Data

by **Jeremy Wallace**  
Cornell University

### I. Introduction

Dictators have limited information about the world, their populations, the threats they may face, and even their own regimes. While dictators spend resources to make their populations legible and build institutions to collect this information, those expenditures face political and budgetary constraints.<sup>1</sup> Further, the bureau-

<sup>1</sup> See Jerven (2013) on the difficulty involved in building strong statistical bureaus in developing countries; Greitens (2016) and Svolik (2012) for more on the political constraints involved in building strong information institutions in the coercive sector; and Blaydes (2018), Scott (1998), and Wallace (2014) on legibility. Restrictions on a free media are the prime example of choosing control over information.

crats inside these institutions can face incentives to deliver manipulated data to the dictator. This brief essay focuses on the political sources and consequences of missing and distorted data in dictatorships, illustrated with thumbnail sketches from the People's Republic of China. First, examples illustrate how ideological and historical constraints harm data quality, leading dictators to make major policy mistakes. Next, I highlight an instance of a regime choosing not to know, where better data collection followed a threat emerging. Then, I turn to how the shape of formal and informal institutions affects the quality of the signals that dictators receive.

## *II. Policy Mistakes*

A dearth of expertise and data lay behind China's infamous 1979 one-child policy. Earlier efforts had already reduced China's fertility rates from six to three children per woman from 1970 to 1979 (Banister, 1987; Whyte, Feng and Cai, 2015). Despite such 'success' in curtailing population growth, Chinese leaders adopted the stringent one-child-per-couple limit, based on population projections from an unexpected source (Greenhalgh, 2005). Chinese military scientists achieved hero status following breakthroughs such as placing a satellite in orbit in 1970, and Song Jian, a rocket scientist, applied techniques from missile control to demography and became a major policy force (Greenhalgh, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Along with a few compatriots, he took over technocratic debates about population policy by attacking social science in China as lacking quantitative skills, which was largely accurate as the ranks of the Chinese intelligentsia — excepting only the military sciences — had been ravaged by the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 (Greenhalgh, 2003, 169–170). Song's first trip abroad exposed him to the Club of Rome's apocalyptic view on overpopulation, but he failed to note any of their critics. Full of misplaced confidence, he and his collaborators presented a "virtual population crisis" to Deng Xiaoping and other new reformist leaders that won the day (Greenhalgh, 2003, 172). Studies document the tremendous social costs of the policy and show that economic development — rather than the one-child policy — actually accounted for China's subsequent reduction in fertility (Whyte, Feng and Cai, 2015; Zhang, 2017). Here, limited connections to the non-Communist world

and the loss of expertise from Cultural Revolution attacks on social science constrained and biased the information that the regime's leaders used to formulate policy.

Concurrent with the one-child policy, distorted data led the Chinese regime to blunder in economic policy, with the disintegration of its vaunted 'Ten Year Plan'. The plan called for jump-starting development by constructing twenty-two industrial mega-projects with imported technologies. The plan's funding depended on continued rapid expansion of oil production: "China's petroleum sector had been one of the few success stories of the Cultural Revolution era: Output had grown by 20% annually between 1969 and 1977, and planners were projecting that rapid increases would continue" (Naughton, 1995, 69). However, that level of growth required finding and developing ten fields on the scale of Daqing, China's largest oil field. The head of the Planning Commission, Yu Qiuli, was intimately familiar with the oil sector and with the Daqing field in particular, as he led the effort that transformed Daqing from semi-frozen marshland into a massive oil production center. Many Planning Commission staffers had backgrounds in oil, yet after a decade of triumph after triumph their expertise had congealed into boosterism. The plan's funding relied on the oil from ten new Daqing-sized fields, yet the fields and their locations were unknowns. Indeed, despite desperate searching and exploratory drilling, they turned out to not exist, as promising sites without verified reserves failed to pan out (Naughton, 1995, 71). Billions of dollars of international deals were suspended, and the plan was abandoned in favor of readjustment, rectification, and reform (Naughton, 1995, 76).

## *III. Choosing Not to Know*

Dictators also consciously choose not to know information. Restraining media and civil society represents one such well-known tradeoff between control and data (Policzer, 2009). Chinese air pollution statistics are another case in point. In 2008, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing began collecting samples of particulate matter under 2.5 micrometers in diameter (PM 2.5), publishing hourly results on Twitter despite complaints from Chinese au-

<sup>2</sup>From a mathematical point of view, missile control techniques lent themselves readily to population control problems, because the trajectories of missiles and populations charted over time followed similar lines, and because the optimization problems for controlling the two objects took functionally similar forms.

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.stateair.net/web/historical/1/1.html>.

thorities.<sup>3</sup> Similar objections had been raised to studies on pollution harming the health of the Chinese people, such as a 2007 World Bank estimate of 750,000 deaths a year (Barboza, 2007; World Bank, 2007).<sup>4</sup> In October 2010, its account tweeted that Beijing's air was "crazy bad" as its reading exceeded 500, twenty times the World Health Organization's guideline for healthy environments.<sup>5</sup> In the fall of 2011, the U.S. Embassy's monitoring equipment again registered scores so polluted that they were "beyond index", while the Beijing city government stated that the air was only "slightly polluted" (Demick, 2011). The official data was not fabricated but instead came from instruments measuring only larger particles (PM 10). In early November, noted real estate mogul Pan Shiyi sent his sixteen million Weibo followers multiple messages calling for the Chinese government to monitor PM 2.5 in addition to PM 10. Days later, Premier Wen Jiabao assented, saying that the government needed to improve its environmental monitoring and bring its results closer to people's perceptions (CCICED, 2012; Oliver, 2014). One year later, PM 2.5 monitoring stations broadcast hourly reports from dozens of cities (Oliver, 2014). A year after that, the Chinese government cracked down on its most influential social media verified users — the Big Vs, such as Pan Shiyi — as a way to control information flows deemed dangerous to the regime (China Digital Times, 2013; Lubman, 2013).

#### IV. Distortion and Data Falsification

Anecdotes of poor policy decisions made by dictators facing a dearth of high quality information are unlimited. Yet building institutions to collect and process information can be difficult logistically and politically. The lack of technically trained staff along with commensurate salaries can hamper the growth of statistical agencies (Jerven, 2013). Principal-agent problems can also arise when local leaders are used to assess both the situation and the local leaders who oversee it.

For instance, the Chinese government used the growth of gross domestic product as a performance standard in evaluating its cadres at lower levels (Li and Zhou, 2005). Yet those cadres also held power over the bureaucrats producing the statistics by which they were assessed, incentivizing bias. Concerns about the quality of Chinese economic data are pervasive, and even

the regime's top leaders have expressed skepticism about such measures. In an interview released by Wikileaks, current Premier Li Keqiang was quoted as saying "GDP figures are 'man-made' and therefore unreliable" (Wikileaks, 2007).

The Chinese government used the growth of gross domestic product as a performance standard in evaluating its cadres at lower levels ... Yet those cadres also held power over the bureaucrats producing the statistics by which they were assessed, incentivizing bias. Concerns about the quality of Chinese economic data are pervasive, and even the regime's top leaders have expressed skepticism about such measures.

Systematically identifying such distortions in official data is difficult, as most relevant and available metrics that could be used to assess the validity of official data are produced by the same bureaucracies. However, some types of data are more sensitive than others, as are some periods of time (Wallace, 2016). GDP data is more sensitive and hence more likely to be manipulated than its correlates, such as electricity production and consumption. GDP manipulation is also likely to vary over the political cycle, in ways similar to those predicted by the political business cycle literature, allowing for the measurement of the induced distortion (Drazen, 2000; Guo, 2009).

#### V. Networks as Informal Information Channels

If dictators are aware of the flaws in their formal information systems and are unwilling to allow for freedom of the press or other kinds of information flows for fear of the possibilities that might be unleashed if they did, then are they doomed to rely on such distorted data? Intriguingly, there is evidence that another kind of information system inside of dictatorships can provide some assistance for dictators looking for higher quality information. Informal networks of regime elites are often derided as cliques or factions and seen as sources of potential danger for dictators and their allies as well as often masking corruption. Indeed, such networks can

<sup>4</sup>The World Bank's mortality estimate includes harms from water pollution as well.

<sup>5</sup>Not expecting such a high reading, programmers jokingly had coded that label for such 'beyond index' scores (Demick, 2011).



and do form the basis of splits amongst elites in moments of crisis that can bring down regimes, as well as be springboards for coups. While from the dictator's perspective such downsides do exist, informal political connections can also improve the quality of data emerging from formal channels. If the potential for promotion is the source of pressure that on occasion produces information manipulation inside the formal system, then other factors reducing the significance of that metric might reduce the incentive to falsify the statistics. In the Chinese case, local leaders might have less incentive to manipulate GDP growth data if they had reason to believe that they were likely to be promoted (or not promoted) anyway. New research shows that political connections with higher level officials can act as an informal information channel, reducing distortion from the formal channel by adjusting incentives and perceptions (Jiang and Wallace, 2017).

## VI. Conclusion

Dictators distort data for their own reasons but also often make decisions based on biased or missing information. Attempts to simplify and systematize complex realities to make threats legible can contort facts into falsehoods. Rare is the underling brave enough to state that the emperor has no clothes. These information problems, especially when paired with the limited checks on established dictators that have personalized power, explain why dictatorships make more disastrous policy mistakes than democracies (Scott, 1998; Svobik, 2012).

The dearth and distortion of dictators' data are not the only information problems facing nondemocracies. Dictatorships tend to have poor information environments, as they are more likely than democracies to constrain press freedom and civil society actors who might provide 'external monitoring' of the regime.<sup>6</sup> Propagation of propaganda is common, as dictators and their regimes often intentionally release distorted data for political purposes. If regimes are stable but occasionally threatened in moments of tumult, then manipulated data may "obfuscate the situation's desperation from the people and reduce the risk of collective action against the regime" (Wallace, 2016). But dictators also unknowingly release and use distorted data, often with disastrous consequences.

## References

- Banister, Judith. 1987. *China's Changing Population*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Barboza, David. 2007. "China reportedly urged omitting pollution-death estimates." *New York Times*, July 5.
- Blaydes, Lisa. 2018. *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- CCICED. 2012. "China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development Annual Report."
- China Digital Times. 2013. "Big Vs speak out against Internet crackdown." September 11.
- Demick, Barbara. 2011. "U.S. Embassy air quality data undercut China's own assessments." *Los Angeles Times*, October 29.
- Drazen, Allan. 2000. "The political business cycle after 25 years." *NBER Macroeconomics Annual* 15:75–117.
- Greenhalgh, Susan. 2003. "Science, modernity, and the making of China's one-child policy." *Population and Development Review* 29(2):163–196.
- Greenhalgh, Susan. 2005. "Missile science, population science: The origins of China's one-child policy." *China Quarterly* 182:253–276.
- Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. 2016. *Dictators and their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Guo, Gang. 2009. "China's local political budget cycles." *American Journal of Political Science* 53(3):621–632.
- Jerven, Morten. 2013. *Poor Numbers: How We are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jiang, Junyan and Jeremy Wallace. 2017. "Informal institutions and authoritarian information systems: Theory and evidence from China." Unpublished manuscript, Chinese University of Hong Kong.
- Li, Hongbin and Li-An Zhou. 2005. "Political turnover and economic performance: The incentive role of personnel control in China." *Journal of Public Economics* 89(9–10):1743–1762.
- Lubman, Stanley. 2013. "The 'legalization' of China's Internet crackdown." *Wall Street Journal*, September 18.
- Naughton, Barry. 1995. *Growing Out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform, 1978–1993*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver, Steven. 2014. "The Politics of Poor Air Quality in Contemporary China." Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, San Diego.
- Policzer, Pablo. 2009. *The Rise and Fall of Repression in Chile*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. Ithaca: Yale University Press.

<sup>6</sup>Policzer (2009, 7) contrasts this external monitoring to 'internal monitoring' by intra-regime institutions.

- Svolik, Milan W. 2012. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wallace, Jeremy. 2014. *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, Jeremy L. 2016. "Juking the stats? Authoritarian information problems in China." *British Journal of Political Science* 46(1):11–29.
- Whyte, Martin King, Wang Feng and Yong Cai. 2015. "Challenging myths about China's one-child policy." *China Journal* (74):144–159.
- Wikileaks. 2007. "Fifth generation star Li Keqiang discusses domestic challenges, trade relations with Ambassador." March 15.
- World Bank. 2007. "Cost of pollution in China: Economic estimates of physical damages."
- Zhang, Junsen. 2017. "The evolution of China's one-child policy and its effects on family outcomes." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(1):141–60.

## Dataset

### Categorizing Media Freedom from 1948-2016: Version 3 of the Global Media Freedom Dataset

by **Jenifer Whitten-Woodring**  
University of Massachusetts Lowell

A free press is essential for peace, justice, and human rights for all. It is crucial to building transparent and democratic societies and keeping those in power accountable. It is vital for sustainable development (United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, World Press Freedom Day 2018).

Media freedom has long been theorized as critical to the promotion of democracy, the prevention of corruption, and the protection of human rights by policy makers, international organizations, and human rights advocates. The presumption that it provides these benefits led to efforts to export press freedom to the developing world in the years following World War II (Blanchard, 1986). Yet until recently, there have been few studies that test the presumed effects of media freedom, largely

due to a lack of consistent data across countries and over time. This was the motivation behind the construction of the Global Media Freedom Dataset (GMFD). GMFD version 3 includes data for all available countries from 1948 to 2016.

The purpose of the GMFD is to identify whether media in a given country-year are able to function as a Fourth Estate in order to facilitate studies focusing on the causes or effects of media freedom (and its absence). The GMFD was gathered using a consistent methodology to categorize the media environment for each country-year as *free media* (1), *imperfectly free media* (2), *not free media* (3), or *no media to code* (0).<sup>1</sup>

These categories are based on the identification of conditions that make it possible for journalists to hold governments accountable. In a media environment that is coded *free*, journalists have the capacity to engage in critical reporting about government policies and the behavior of political leaders even if such critical reporting could anger citizens and lead them to push for regime change, such as the coverage of the Watergate scandal in the United States. Examples of country-years coded *free* include Costa Rica (1948-2016), New Zealand (1948-2016), and Ghana (2001-2014). If journalists are able to criticize the government, but will pay some costs for doing so, or are constrained from doing so in at least one medium or region of the country, then media are coded as *imperfectly free*. Cases in this category include India (1948-1974; 1978-2016), where independently owned newspapers can and do provide critical coverage of the government, but radio news coverage is permitted only on the state-owned AM radio stations. The Indian government has also shut down newspapers and mobile Internet service in conflict prone regions, especially Jammu and Kashmir. For these reasons, media in India for most years are coded as *imperfectly free*. If media are controlled by the government directly or indirectly to the extent that journalists and news organizations are prohibited from serving as a Fourth Estate (or face dire consequences if they do so), then the media environment is coded *not free*. Cases in this category include Egypt (1948-2006; 2010; 2012-2016), Rwanda (1962-2016), Myanmar (1962-2016), and Portugal (1948-1994). The only cases with *no media to code* are the Republic of Congo (1960-1968) and Nepal

<sup>1</sup>In the first version of this dataset gathered by Van Belle (1997), *not free* was comprised of two categories: indirectly controlled by the government and directly controlled by the government. We find that with the proliferation of the Internet and other digital media, there are almost no media systems that fall under complete government control, the exception being North Korea.

(1949-1959).

Figure 1 depicts the number of countries with *free*, *imperfectly free*, and *not free* media from 1948 to 2016. Following World War II, and especially in the 1960s as countries in Africa and Asia gained independence, the number of countries with *not free* media increased from 41 (1948) to 109 (1975). During the same time period, the number of countries with *free* media increased steadily for the most part from 23 (1948) to 30 (1975). During this time the number of countries with *imperfectly free* media fluctuated from 12 (1948) to 23 (1968) to 13 (1975). In the years leading up to and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the number of countries with *not free* media declined while the number of countries with *free* media and *imperfectly free* media increased. With the global proliferation of Internet access in the mid 1990s, the number of countries with *not free* media generally decreased and the number of countries with *imperfectly free* media for the most part increased, while the number of countries with *free* media remained relatively consistent. The 2000s and 2010s have, for the most part, seen an increase in the number of countries with *imperfectly free* media, a decrease in the number of countries with *free* media, and some limited fluctuation in the number of countries with *not free* media.

Media freedom has long been theorized as critical to the promotion of democracy, the prevention of corruption, and the protection of human rights by policy makers, international organizations, and human rights advocates ... Yet until recently, there have been few studies that test the presumed effects of media freedom, largely due to a lack of consistent data across countries and over time.

It is important to note that the focus of the GMFD is on the media's capacity to hold governments accountable rather than actual practices, because media freedom and journalistic practices do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. One of the criticisms of news media in western democracies is that they often fail to perform this idealized watchdog role. Take for example the U.S. media's failure to challenge the Bush administration during the buildup to the war in Iraq and the British media's lack of factual and analytical coverage

in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum (Kurtz, 2004; New York Times, 2004; Barnett, 2016). In both cases news media were independent and free from government censorship, but failed to provide critical news coverage about issues of great importance. In contrast, journalists in countries where media are *not free* will sometimes engage in critical coverage even though they are fully aware that they may be killed for doing so. A case in point is *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga. Though media in Sri Lanka in 2009 were decidedly not free, he persisted in reporting on government violations of human rights and in a posthumously published editorial correctly predicted that he would be killed for doing so (Wickrematunge, 2009).

### I. Media Freedom and Democracy

There is a general assumption that media freedom and democracy must coexist. Yet, while this is often the case, it is not always so. When utilizing GMFD and controlling for regime type, it is important to select a measure that focuses on institutional characteristics rather than civil liberties. Though the Polity IV Project (Marshall, Gurr and Jaggers, 2017) does not explicitly code for civil liberties (Choi and James, 2007), the executive constraints variable from the Polity IV Project provides a useful proxy for democratic institutions. It measures checks on the power of the executive and is the most influential component of the Polity IV scale (Gleditsch and Ward, 1997). Figure 2 depicts the dispersion of *free*, *imperfectly free* and *not free* media across a range of executive constraints from (1) 'unlimited authority' to (7) 'executive parity or subordination' (Marshall, Gurr and Jaggers, 2017).

As expected, most cases of *free* media occur in states with the highest levels of executive constraints (generally consolidated democracies) and most cases of *not free* media occur in states with lower levels of executive constraints (autocracies). Yet, there are cases of *not free* media in democracies, including Hungary (1990-1994), Turkey (1961-1992 & 2013), and Mexico (2010-2016). Though there are few cases of *free* media in highly autocratic states (Gambia 1994 and Ghana 1981), there are many cases of *imperfectly free* media in this regime type, including El Salvador (1950-1955 & 1977), Liberia (1972-1981), and the Philippines (1984-1985).

Since the effort to export media freedom to the developing world began, a number of organizations have

Figure 1: Media Freedom Year-by-Year

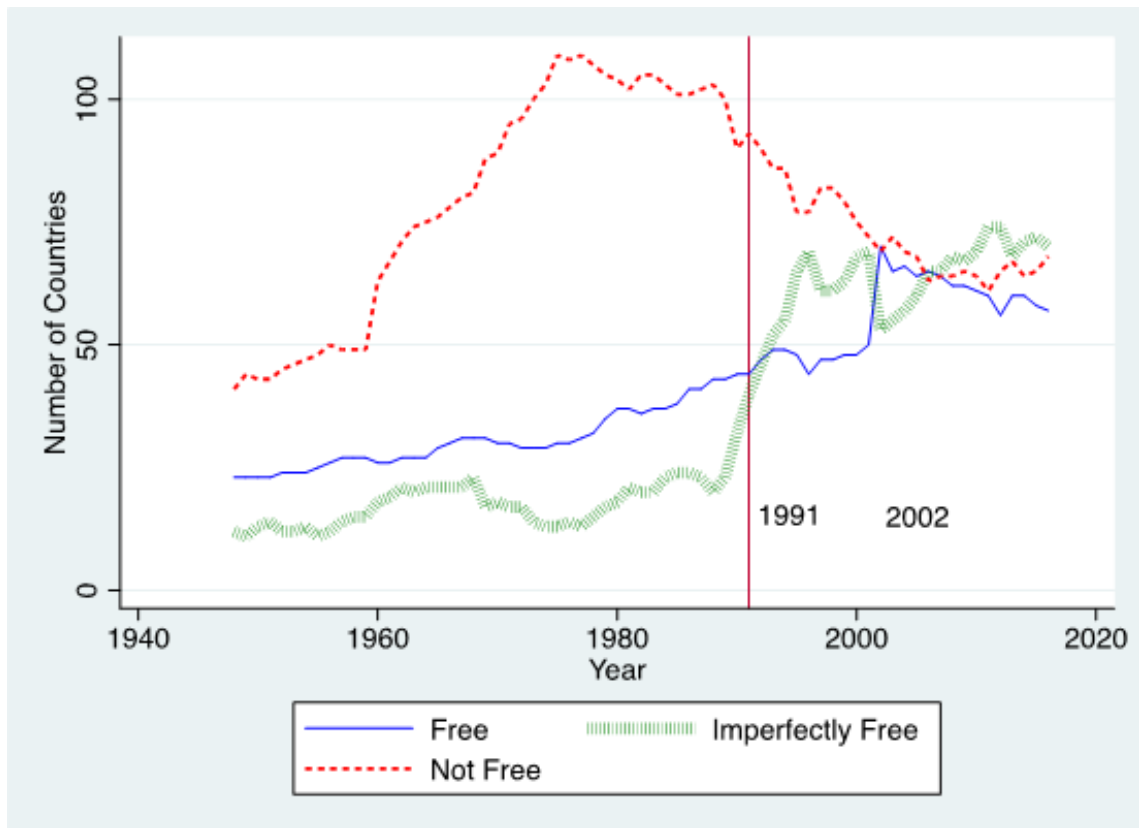
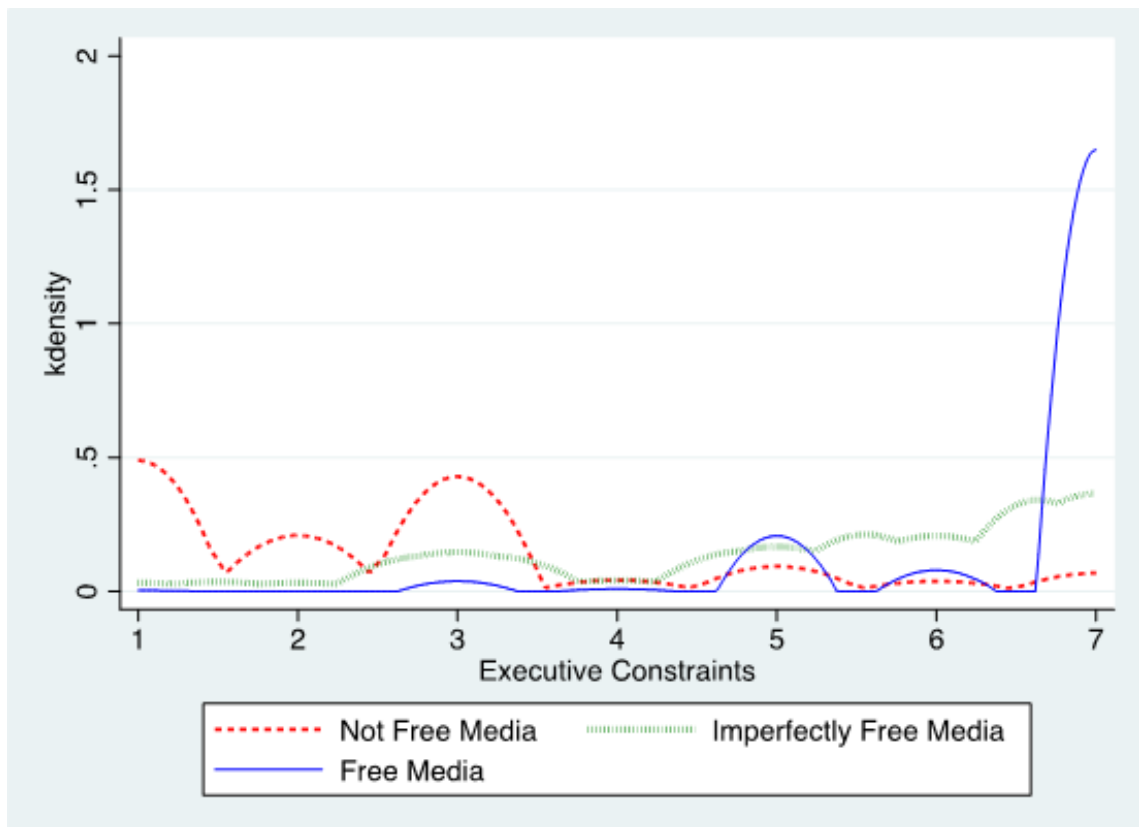


Figure 2: Media Freedom and Regime Type





sought to track media freedom, including the International Press Institute and the Inter-American Press Association, and more recently Freedom House, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Yet for the most part, these organizations are tracking and documenting infractions on media freedom rather than identifying its presence or absence. In gathering the GMFD, we used information from these sources to code the media environment for each country-year. In addition, we utilized accounts from historians and regional experts, as well as reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. Department of State.

## II. Where to Find the GMFD

The GMFD is available for download [here](#). When using the dataset, please cite:

- Whitten-Woodring, Jenifer, and Douglas A. Van Belle. (2017). “The correlates of media freedom: An introduction of the Global Media Freedom Dataset.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 5(1): 179-188.

In addition to the dataset, qualitative descriptions of the evolution and devolution of media freedom in each country, detailed information about the coding sources for each country, and the conceptualization and history of media freedom are also available ([Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle, 2014](#)).

## III. Comparing GMFD to Other Datasets

Reporters Sans Frontières, IREX, and Freedom House provide datasets on ‘media freedom’, but their data and methodologies differ from each other and the GMFD in important ways. IREX (2018) provides a *Media Sustainability Index*, which is aimed at evaluating media sustainability and is focused on the sustainability rather than the watchdog capability of the media. It is also limited in its temporal (varies by region, with earliest available data from 2001) and geographic (80 countries) coverage. Since 2002, Reporters Sans Frontières’ (2018) *World Press Freedom Index* has provided an annual ranking of 180 countries created in consultation with media professionals and other experts. As of 2013, the index includes a score for each country ranging from 0, meaning “the best”, to 100, meaning “the worst”. [Freedom House \(2017\)](#) began producing its *Freedom of the*

*Press* report in 1980, and while it has always been comprehensive, over the years the methodology and scoring has changed. Since 2002, Freedom House has used a consistent methodology and provides a score for each country that ranges from 0, meaning “most free”, to 100, meaning “least free”. As indicated by their scoring systems, both the RSF and Freedom House datasets are really measures of media restrictions (the higher the score, the greater the restrictions).

Both RSF and Freedom House use their scores to identify the level of media freedom in a given country. Freedom House labels countries with a score of 0 to 30 as *free*, 31 to 60 as *partly free*, and 61 to 100 as *not free*. Similarly, RSF labels countries scoring 0 to 15 as *good*, 15.01 to 25 as *fairly good*, 25.01 to 35 as *problematic*, 35.01 to 55 as *bad*, and 55.01 to 100 as *very bad*. The more recent reports and data from Freedom House and RSF provide valuable information about media environments and both have been used in the recent updates of GMFD. The difference between the Freedom House and RSF datasets and GMFD are in the cutoffs for the categories. Though most countries coded as *imperfectly free* in GMFD are also coded as *partly free* by Freedom House, there are some cases that are not. Most of the differences happen at Freedom House’s border between *partly free* and *not free*. There is probably little difference between a country with a score of 60 (*partly free*) and one with a score of 61 (*not free*) in Freedom House, but in GMFD the difference between a country coded as *imperfectly free* and one coded as *not free* is substantial because in an *imperfectly free* country, media are (in at least one sector) able to function as a Fourth Estate, but in a *not free* country, media are incapable of fulfilling this role. An example of this difference between Freedom House and GMFD would be the coding of Kuwait. GMFD codes Kuwait as *not free* from 1961 to 2016. In contrast, Freedom House codes Kuwait as *partly free* from 2001 to 2016, with a score ranging from 49 (2001) to 60 (2016) even though Freedom House’s (2016) report describes the environment as “restricted” in which “journalists and social media users deemed to have insulted the emir or Saudi Arabia often face prosecution, and the government sustains efforts to stifle criticism of its actions and policies.”

In conclusion, while there are certainly choices of data measuring media freedom, censorship, and media restrictions, only the Global Media Freedom Dataset covers all available countries from 1948 to 2016 using a

consistent definition and methodology.

## References

- Barnett, Steven. 2016. "The tragic downfall of British media." *Foreign Policy*, July 8.
- Blanchard, Margaret A. 1986. *Exporting the First Amendment: The Press-Government Crusade of 1945-1952*. Longman Publishing Group.
- Choi, Seung-Whan and Patrick James. 2007. "Media openness, democracy and militarized interstate disputes." *British Journal of Political Science* 37(1):23-46.
- Freedom House. 2016. "Kuwait: Freedom of the Press." *Freedom of the Press*.
- Freedom House. 2017. "Freedom of the Press."
- Gleditsch, Kristian S. and Michael D. Ward. 1997. "Double take: A reexamination of democracy and autocracy in modern polities." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41(3):361-383.
- Kurtz, Howard. 2004. "The post on WMDs: An inside story." *Washington Post*, August 12.
- Marshall, Monty G., Ted Robert Gurr and K. Jaggers. 2017. "Polity IV project." *Polity IV Project*.
- New York Times. 2004. "From the Editors; The Times and Iraq." *New York Times*, May 26.
- Van Belle, Douglas A. 1997. "Press freedom and the democratic peace." *Journal of Peace Research* 34(4):405-414.
- Whitten-Woodring, Jenifer and Douglas A. Van Belle. 2014. *Historical Guide to World Media Freedom: A Country-by-Country Analysis*. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Whitten-Woodring, Jenifer and Douglas A. Van Belle. 2017. "The correlates of media freedom: An introduction of the Global Media Freedom Dataset." *Political Science Research and Methods* 5(1):179-188.
- Wickrematunge, Lasantha. 2009. "And then they came for me." *Sunday Leader*, January 11.

---

## Other News

### APSA Comparative Politics Section Prize Winners 2018

The Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association awards various prizes each year. Below is a brief summary of the prize winners for 2018, along with a description provided by the relevant awards committee.

#### I. Luebbert Book Award

The Luebbert Book Award is given for the best book in the field of comparative politics published in the previous two years.

**Winner:** [Diana Fu](#) (University of Toronto) for her book, *Mobilizing Without the Masses: Control and Contention in China* (Cambridge University Press).

**Honorable mention:** [Karen Jusko](#) (Stanford) for her book *Who Speaks for the Poor?: Electoral Geography, Party Entry, and Representation* (Cambridge University Press).

**Award committee members:** [Karen Anderson](#) (University College Dublin, chair), [Michael Albertus](#) (University of Chicago), and [Prerna Singh](#) (Brown University)

Diana Fu's *Mobilizing without the Masses* is a splendid book; it employs ethnographic methods to advance a novel theoretical argument about political contention in authoritarian regimes. Diana analyzes the activities of NGOs involved in helping migrant workers in China, finding that labor activists developed innovative strategies to recruit and assist individual workers in defending their rights. Labor activists experimented with a variety of tactics in response to a repressive and authoritarian political opportunity structure, coaching individuals about how to confront state officials about their rights. Diana calls this process "mobilizing without the masses" because it is located between the collective and individual levels; it represents an organized process, yet contention takes place at the individual level. At the same time, those making rights claims are part of a larger movement organized by civil society organizations, fostering the emergence of a collective identity. Mobilization without the masses is thus a process through which civil society organizations engage in contention in repressive political contexts.

In China, mobilizing without the masses is a direct response to the state's flexible repression policy. Civil society groups were tolerated, and even allowed some freedom, as long as they did not directly and collectively mobilize. In response, migrant labor activists developed mobilization strategies based on "dynamic individual contention", where labor leaders adapted to repressive opportunity structures by coaching individual migrant workers to behave in certain ways in order to pursue

improvements in their working conditions. This included individual strategies for interacting with employers, flash protests, and the use of social media. The book thus challenges prevailing notions about whether contentious politics in repressive regimes is possible.

The research has important implications for our understanding of political contention in authoritarian regimes. The book provides a theoretical framework for explaining how the broader institutional environment creates incentives for informal labor organizing and mobilizing without the masses. In short, mobilizing without the masses is a direct response to the type of repression carried out by central and local authorities, because labor leaders maneuvered within the freedom of movement provided to them.

The book is based on extensive ethnographic research among migrant workers and labor activists in China. Fu spent 18 months embedded in labor organizations, allowing her to observe the hidden recruitment and coaching process that was so important to mobilizing without the masses. *Mobilizing without the Masses* is a first-rate work of comparative politics; it is an important contribution to our understanding of processes of political contention in general, and mobilization in repressive political environments in particular.

## II. Luebbert Article Award

The Luebbert Article Award is given for the best article in the field of comparative politics published in the previous two years.

**Winner:** [Noam Lupu](#) (Vanderbilt University) and [Leonid Peisakhin](#) (New York University – Abu Dhabi) for their 2017 article, “The legacy of violence across generations.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61(4): 836-851.

**Honorable mention:** [Volha Charnysh](#) (MIT) and [Evgeny Finkel](#) (Johns Hopkins University) for their article, “The death camp El Dorado: Political and economic effects of mass violence.” *American Political Science Review* 111(4): 801-818.

**Award committee members:** [Beatriz Magaloni](#) (Stanford University, chair), [Rachel Beatty Riedl](#) (Northwestern University), and [Daniel Hidalgo](#) (MIT)

The committee decided the Luebbert Award for Best Paper on the basis of three criteria: (1) Does the paper ask an important and sufficiently broad question that has the potential to shape the development of the comparative subfield? (2) Does the paper offer an innovative approach to answer the question, including through the development of novel and original data? (3) Does the paper meet high methodological standards?

The committee unanimously agreed that the article by Noam Lupu and Leonid Peisakhin meets these criteria. The question the paper addresses is important. The state regularly perpetrates violence against its citizens and a critical question is if these leave lasting legacies, potentially shaping contemporary political identities and behaviors. And if so, might they be passed down through *families* from one generation to the next?

To answer these critical questions, the paper conducted an innovative multigenerational survey of Crimean Tatars, who were deported from their homeland to Central Asia in 1944. The survey interviewed three generations of respondents in 300 families in Crimea, then part of Ukraine, whose families had returned from the Soviet Union. The fact that the descendants had little to no interaction with the Soviet state helps Noam and Leonid isolate the effect of family socialization.

The statistical results are compelling: the descendants of individuals who suffered more intensely identify more strongly with their ethnic group, support more strongly the Crimean Tatar political leadership, hold more hostile attitudes toward Russia, and participate more in politics. Noam and Leonid provide compelling evidence that identities are passed down from the victims of the deportation to their descendants. They also outline a powerful mechanism of transmission of political identities and ethnic-parochialism for which the literature had not previously offered systematic empirical evidence. This is the first multigenerational survey on the legacies of political violence. Overall, we find the paper theoretically sophisticated, influential, and empirically innovative.

## III. Sage Best Paper Award

The Sage Best Paper Award is given to the best paper in the field of comparative politics presented at the previous year's American Political Science Association An-

nual Meeting.

**Winner:** [Daniel Treisman](#) (UCLA) for his paper, “Democracy by mistake.”

**Award committee members:** [Kenneth Greene](#) (UT Austin, chair), [Robert Braun](#) (UC Berkeley), and [Jesica Gottlieb](#) (Texas A&M University)

In “Democracy by mistake”, Dan Treisman sheds new light on a well-worn question — what causes authoritarian regimes to become democracies? One strain of this literature has long focused on elite decisions to cede authoritarian political power, often as a deliberate decision to preserve economic power. Dan shows that about a third of cases fit this model but he writes that “democracy has often emerged not because incumbent elites deliberately chose it but because, in seeking to prevent it, they made one or more critical mistakes.” In conditions of uncertainty, plausibly brought on by longer-term structural forces or cultural change, leaders often overestimated their own power to prevail in elections, triumph in military conflicts they initiated, limit attempts at partial reform, or successfully manage relations among the ruling elite.

Hubris appears as a cause in prior voluntarist work on authoritarian breakdown, yet it has remained understudied both theoretically and empirically. We all know that political actors make mistakes, but error has not traditionally sat well in social science theories that search for underlying rational action and typically assume that errors are random. Drawing on recent theory in behavioral economics, Dan Treisman shows that systematic error in calculating regime strength helps explain about two-third of transitions to democracy.

Empirically, voluntarist arguments are usually of limited scope, focusing on a handful of cases. Not only does collecting data for a project like this take tremendous work, but scholars may have been dissuaded by the seeming folly of studying elite error in an area dominated by structuralist and rationalist theories. Dan Treisman took on the gutsy and time-consuming task of tracing the process of democratization in 218 historical cases that qualify under a variety of standard definitions. His paper summarizes the findings and hints at the tremendous historical detail that lurks underneath these summaries.

#### *IV. Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba Dataset Award*

The Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba Dataset Award recognizes a publicly available dataset that has made an important contribution to the field of comparative politics.

**Winner:** [Mitchell Seligson](#) (Vanderbilt University), [Elizabeth Zechmeister](#) (Vanderbilt University), and [Noam Lupu](#) (Vanderbilt University) for the [AmericasBarometer](#).

**Honorable mention:** [Mihály Fazekas](#) (University of Cambridge) for [DIGIWHIST](#).

**Award committee members:** [Taylor Boas](#) (Boston University, chair), [Pablo Beramendi](#) (Duke University), and [Fred Solt](#) (University of Iowa)

The committee is pleased to announce that the 2018 Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba Dataset Award goes to the AmericasBarometer surveys, which have been coordinated by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University since 2004. AmericasBarometer was nominated by a distinguished group of 15 political scientists who described it as “the ‘gold standard’ for survey data on political attitudes and behavior in emerging democracies.” The 2016-17 round of the biennial surveys administered a common questionnaire in 29 countries of the Americas, including the United States and Canada — every nation-state in the hemisphere except for Cuba and a handful of small Caribbean islands. AmericasBarometer has had a huge impact on the discipline; the colleagues who nominated it counted 335 dissertations using the data since 2005, and 250 journal articles in 2017 alone. The project was a pioneer in terms of open data access, offering the data for free, without subscription or embargo period. It has been at the forefront of innovation in survey methods, including the use of satellite imagery to refine samples and a quality control mechanism that allows supervisors to monitor fieldwork in real time. The project’s website offers extensive documentation on every survey, including high levels of transparency about methodology. Its staff are responsive to queries and move quickly to address errors found in the data. All of us on the committee — Latin Americanists and non-Latin Americanists alike — agreed that AmericasBarometer has made a major contribution to the study of comparative politics and that the field would be much poorer without it.



The committee also awarded an honorable mention to the DIGIWHIST project, coordinated by the University of Cambridge. The DIGIWHIST database contains 17.5 million public procurement contracts from 32 European countries. It represents a collaboration among 35 scholars, including political scientists, sociologists, and computer scientists. DIGIWHIST built custom software to scrape published contracts from the web and extract common data from these documents, whose structure differs across countries and over time — an enormous amount of work. They maintain a GitHub page with all data collection and cleaning code, an impressive level of transparency. We expect this new dataset to be of broad use to scholars of European political economy in the coming years.

#### *V. Powell Graduate Mentoring Award*

The Powell Graduate Mentoring Award, introduced in 2012, is awarded on a biannual basis to a political scientist who throughout his or her career has demonstrated a particularly outstanding commitment to the mentoring of graduate students in comparative politics. The prize was named in honor of G. Bingham Powell and was initiated by his students.

**Winner:** [John Huber](#) (Columbia University).

**Award committee members:** [Tasha Fairfield](#) (London School of Economics, chair), [Torben Iversen](#) (Harvard University), and [Meleia Platas Izama](#) (New York University – Abu Dhabi)

We are delighted to honor John Huber with the 2018 Powell Graduate Mentoring Award. The committee members were deeply impressed with the many enthusiastic letters submitted on John's behalf, which highlighted the extraordinary quality of his contributions to graduate student mentoring throughout his career.

We would like to recognize in particular the following attributes and contributions, which were emphasized consistently across multiple letters of support:

- Willingness to work with students from diverse fields;
- Empowering students to pursue their own interests and achieve their full potential as independent scholars;
- Directing students to follow their substantive passions rather than the trends of the day or their advisor's areas of expertise;

- Supporting methodological diversity and encouraging students to build on their strengths—whether quantitative or qualitative;
- Providing support for reflective students who do not simply ride out the stress of academia on a wave of innate self-confidence;
- And a remarkable and invaluable contribution to supporting and mentoring women— including everything from promoting inclusive and non-sexist language in the workplace, to encouraging female students to enter traditionally male-dominated areas such as formal theory, and helping equip them with the confidence and skill to succeed.

Please join us in congratulating and thanking John Huber for these accomplishments. We would also like to recognize all of the nominees for their outstanding mentoring contributions and thank their students and colleagues for taking the time to share their appreciations.

---

## A Letter and Comment from the President of APSA's Comparative Politics Section

by [Cathie Jo Martin](#)  
Boston University

As the President of APSA's Comparative Politics section, it is my pleasure to thank Sona Golder and Matt Golder for their superb work as editors of our section's *Newsletter* over the last four years. Sona and Matt have approached their task with energy and enthusiasm; as a result, they have produced products of the highest quality. The various issues of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* are a terrific way for the non-expert to quickly master the nuances of a new topic or be introduced to scholars working on shared research agendas. Under Sona and Matt's leadership, the *Newsletter* has encouraged us to think about issues of great importance to scholars of comparative politics, including racial and gender discrimination, populism, data access and research transparency, policing, and fake news. I am also thrilled to report that we now have a new editorial team for the *Newsletter* based at Johns Hopkins SAIS and led by Evgeny Finkel. I very much look forward to the forthcoming issues.

The study of culture has been marginalized in political science for the past few decades and for some excellent reasons. Although some scholars such as Almond and Verba explored cultural influences through the medium of public opinion, many other national cultural arguments in the 1950s and 1960s were sweeping, essentialist, and difficult to falsify. Yet culture — however hard to measure — seems intuitively important, and recently scholars such as Kate McNamara, Sheri Berman, and Lisa Wedeen have explored the dynamic use of cultural artifacts in political struggle, in a manner inspired by cultural sociologists such as Michele Lamont, Wendy Griswold, Ann Swidler, and Mabel Berezin.

I contribute to the cultural turn in political science by applying computational linguistics and machine learning processes to a corpora of British and Danish literature. In a recent *World Politics* article entitled “Imagine all the people: Literature, society, and cross-national variation in education systems” (Martin, 2018), I suggest that fiction writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are crucial but understudied actors in early political development. Writers sometimes participate directly in policy struggles, as when Matthew Arnold worked closely with his brother-in-law, William Forster, to design the British Elementary Education Act of 1870. Writers frequently influence the preferences of politicians, bureaucrats, and participants in class struggles through the cognitive framing and emotional appeals on behalf of policy problems. Thus, Charles Dickens was to brag that, in comparison to a political pamphlet, *A Christmas Carol* would have “twenty thousand times the force” to bring about child labor laws (Henderson, 2000). These connections among writers and policymakers may be documented with careful archival research and process tracing.

Writers of fiction also act as purveyors of cultural symbols and narratives that form their country’s literary traditions. Of course, many different symbols and narratives are found in many different countries. But as with Michele Lamont’s repertoires of evaluation, cultural symbols and narratives are unevenly distributed across countries. As students of literature, writers inherit the cultural artifacts of the past and rework these symbols and narratives for contemporary challenges. This process is not deterministic; the canon constantly evolves, as innovative authors make their mark. Yet one

may observe broad cross-national differences in cultural symbols and narratives, and these differences are associated with divergent policy paths.

My article uses cultural artifacts to understand the origins of diverse education models in Britain and Denmark, and the impacts of these systems on the economic fortunes of low-skill youth. Diverse education systems present a paradox. Northern European education systems have much higher levels of educational diversity (with strong vocational education and training and fewer national standards) but higher socioeconomic equality. Liberal education systems have greater equality of educational opportunity but higher levels of socioeconomic inequality.

I suggest that this incongruity reflects different cultural beliefs about the central role of education: education may be viewed primarily either as an individual right and intervention for personal self-discovery, or as a mechanism for cultivating a strong society. Rights-oriented education demands high levels of standardization and regulation to ensure educational equality. In contrast, education for societal investment requires a plurality of educational experiences to cultivate diverse skills.

A close reading of coming-of-age novels in Britain and Denmark demonstrates that authors differ cross-nationally on their views of education, as well as on the role of the individual in society, relations among social groups, and appropriate institutions for political solutions. British novels beginning in the early eighteenth-century largely portrayed learning as an individualistic activity of self-discovery and novelists sought to expand the right to education to improve the circumstances of the poor. British youth in coming-of-age novels, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *David Copperfield*, used individual initiative to triumph over adversity. British authors deeply resented structural economic injustices, but also viewed most institutions — government bureaucracies, employers’ organizations, and even unions — as abusive. Expanding rights through courts was their cure for social ills. In comparison, Danish novels portrayed education as a tool for building a strong society, and youth were required to submit to the wisdom of elders for the good of society. Danish authors were deeply patriotic and far less skeptical of state institutions and emergent labor market organizations than their British counterparts, ignored courts, and believed that boys

should be whipped into shape so that they could contribute to society.

Applying computational linguistics and topic modeling to snippets of text around education words, I find significant differences between the British and Danish corpora between 1700 and 1920. British snippets surrounding education words were more likely to include references to individuals, feelings, and upper class people; Danish snippets were more likely to reference society and the state.

These cultural differences have contributed to the economic disparities between the Anglo and Nordic political economies. A desire to nurture a strong society rather than concerns about equality among individuals was the defining motivation for early Danish investments in education, and high levels of equality were a felicitous side effect. In collectivist Denmark, a desire to build a strong society produced a mandate to educate all the people: neglect of low-skill youth was viewed as a waste of societal resources and a threat to the social fabric. In individualistic Britain, one found socially-substandard education systems, higher levels of educational inequalities, and a disregard for those left out of mainstream markets. British stories enabled the neglect of marginal youth, because stories of boys who conquer challenges with self-initiative make it easier to blame those who fail.

## References

- Henderson, James. 2000. "Political economy is a mere skeleton unless ...": What can social economists learn from Charles Dickens?" *Review of Social Economy* 58(2):141–151.
- Martin, Cathie Jo. 2018. "Imagine all the people: Literature, society, and cross-national variation in education systems." *World Politics* 70(3):398–442.
-

## Editors and Contributors

### Matt Golder



Matt Golder is a Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the [Department of Political Science](#) at [The Pennsylvania State University](#). His research looks at how political institutions affect democratic representation. In addition to articles in leading journals, such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Annual Review of Political Science*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, and *Political Analysis*, he has also published two books, *Principles of Comparative Politics* and *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. He is currently working on three research projects. The first looks at negative campaigning in a multiparty context, the second involves a book project on interaction models, and the third examines various aspects of women's representation. In addition to serving as chair of APSA's section on [Representation and Electoral Systems](#) (2011-2013), he is also a member of the advisory board for the [Electoral Integrity Project](#) led by Pippa Norris at Harvard University. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

### Sona N. Golder



Sona Golder is a Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at [The Pennsylvania State University](#). She is an editor at the *British Journal of Political Science*, an editor for a new book series, the *Oxford Politics of Institutions Series*, for Oxford University Press, and an associate editor for *Research & Politics*. She is also on the editorial boards of the *American Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *Political Science Research and Methods*. She studies political institutions, with a particular interest in coalition formation. In addition to publishing four books, *The Logic of Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation*, *Multi-Level Electoral Politics: Beyond the Second-Order Election Model*, *Principles of Comparative Politics*, and *Foundations of Comparative Politics*, she has also published in many of the discipline's leading journals, including the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, and *Political Analysis*. She is involved in the women in methods group — she was the organizer and host for the [4th Annual Visions in Methodology \(VIM\) Conference](#), she has served as a VIM mentor for female graduate students and junior faculty, and she was a member of the diversity committee for APSA's Political Methodology Section. More information can be found at her [website](#) and on her [Google scholar profile](#).



Pablo Barberá



Pablo Barberá is an Assistant Professor of Computational Social Science in the [Department of Methodology](#) at the [London School of Economics](#). His research focuses on social media and politics, computational social science, and comparative electoral behavior and political representation. His research has been published in journals such as *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Behavior*, *Political Analysis*, and *Political Psychology*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

Brett L. Carter



Brett L. Carter is an Assistant Professor in the [School of International Relations](#) at the [University of Southern California](#). His research focuses on politics in the world's autocracies. He is currently working on three book projects: one on autocratic survival in post-Cold War Africa, one that employs computational techniques to understand the political foundations of autocratic propaganda, and one that exploits the Foreign Agents Registration Act to explore the role of autocratic money in American politics. His research has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Democracy*. More information can be found at his [website](#).

Erin Baggott Carter



Erin Baggott Carter is an Assistant Professor in the [School of International Relations](#) at the [University of Southern California](#). Her research focuses on Chinese foreign policy and propaganda. Based on an original dataset of five million articles from state-run newspapers in nearly 70 countries, she recently completed a book on autocratic propaganda. She is currently working on two other book projects: one on the domestic sources of US-China relations, and one that exploits the Foreign Agents Registration Act to explore the role of autocratic money in American politics. More information can be found at her [website](#).

Charles Crabtree



Charles Crabtree is a Ph.D. Candidate in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of Michigan](#). His substantive research focuses on measuring and examining various aspects of repression and discrimination in comparative, American, and international politics. His current research agenda centers on the politics of policing. His research has been published in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Political Analysis*, and *International Studies Quarterly*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

Yaoyao Dai



Yaoyao Dai is a Ph.D. candidate in the [Department of Political Science](#) and the [Department of Asian Studies](#) at [Pennsylvania State University](#). She is also the pre-doctoral research associate at the [Center for Social Data Analytics](#) at Pennsylvania State University and a member of [Team Populism](#), an interdisciplinary group of scholars from Europe and the Americas who study the causes and consequences of populism. Her research focuses on populism in authoritarian regimes, information manipulation (censorship and propaganda), and anti-corruption campaigns. She is also interested in experiments, measurement issues, quantitative text analysis, and computational social science. More information can be found at her [website](#).

Anita Gohdes



Anita Gohdes is an Assistant Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of Zurich](#). In February 2019, she'll be joining the [Hertie School of Governance](#) in Berlin as a Professor of International and Cyber Security. Her research focuses on political violence, state repression, and the measurement of human rights. Her research has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Significance*, and the *Journal of Human Rights*. Since 2009, she has also participated in the [Human Rights Data Analysis Group](#). More information can be found at her [website](#) and on her [Google scholar profile](#).

Thomas Gschwend



Thomas Gschwend is a Professor for Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences at the [School of Social Sciences](#) at the [University of Mannheim](#) in Germany. His research focuses on electoral behavior, public opinion, and comparative politics. In addition to publishing several books, including *Multi-Level Electoral Politics: Beyond the Second-Order Election Model*, he has also published numerous articles in journals such as *Electoral Studies*, *Political Analysis*, the *Journal of Politics*, the *European Journal of Political Research*, and *Party Politics*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

Carlo M. Horz



Carlo M. Horz is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. In 2019, he will join the [Department of Political Science](#) at [Texas A&M University](#) as an Assistant Professor. His research focuses on elites' choices of instruments used for political survival, with a special focus on propaganda, and the conditions under which different instruments are effective. More information can be found at his [website](#).

Indriði H. Indriðason



Indriði H. Indriðason is a Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of California, Riverside](#) and an editor at *Research & Politics*. His research focuses on electoral systems, electoral behavior, coalition formation, and cabinet management strategies. He has published numerous articles in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Science Research and Methods*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Economics and Politics*, and the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

Marisa Kellam



Marisa Kellam is an Associate Professor in the [School of Political Science and Economics](#) at [Waseda University](#) in Japan. Her research focuses on the quality of democracy in Latin America. In her research, institutional analysis is linked to various governance outcomes in democracies within three lines of inquiry: political parties and coalitional politics; mass electoral behavior and party system change; and democratic accountability and media freedom. Her research has been published in journals such as the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Party Politics*, *Electoral Studies*, and *Political Communication*. More information can be found at her [website](#) and on her [Google scholar profile](#).

Andrew Little



Andrew Little is an Assistant Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of California, Berkeley](#). His research focuses on authoritarian politics, communication and information manipulation, and conflict. His research has been published in journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, *Games and Economic Behavior*, *International Organization*, the *Journal of Politics*, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

Luwei Rose Luqiu



Luwei Rose Luqiu is an Assistant Professor in the [School of Communication](#) at [Hong Kong Baptist University](#) and a former television journalist. Her research focuses on state censorship and propaganda. In addition to publishing numerous books from her time as a journalist on the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, she has also published articles in journals such as the *Asia Journal of Communication*, the *Chinese Journal of Communication*, and the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. More information can be found at her [website](#) and on her [Google scholar profile](#).

Cathie Jo Martin



Cathie Jo Martin is a Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) and Director of the [Center for the Study of Europe](#) at [Boston University](#). Her research focuses on the relationship between business and social policy and other issues in comparative public policy. In addition to publishing several books, such as *The Political Construction of Business Interests: Coordination, Growth and Equality* and *Stuck in Neutral: Business and the Politics of Human Capital Investment Policy*, she has also published articles in journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *World Politics*, and *Comparative Political Studies*. More information can be found at her [website](#).

Stephen A. Meserve



Stephen A. Meserve is an Associate Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at [Texas Tech University](#). His research focuses on comparative political economy, comparative legislative politics, and measurement issues, with a particular regional focus on Europe. He has a particular interest in the political economy of development, digital politics, and legislative politics in the European Parliament. His research has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Politics*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Political Analysis*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and *Comparative Political Studies*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

Arturas Rozenas



Arturas Rozenas is an Assistant Professor in the [Department of Politics](#) at [New York University](#). His research focuses on building theoretical models of authoritarian politics and testing them using natural experiments, field experiments, and machine learning tools. He is especially interested in information manipulation through media, propaganda, and elections, as well as the causes and consequences of state repression in post-communist Europe. His research has been published in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, and *Political Analysis*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

#### Denis Stukal



Denis Stukal is a Postdoc in Data Science at the [Social Media and Political Participation \(SMaPP\) Lab](#) at [New York University](#). His research focuses on data science, computational communication, and political methodology. He is especially interested in analyzing large corpora of texts and collections of other social media data to study misinformation and computational propaganda. His research has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Politics* and *Comparative Politics*. More information can be found at his [website](#).

#### Joseph Uscinski



Joseph Uscinski is an Associate Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of Miami](#). His research focuses on public opinion and the mass media, with a special interest in conspiracy theories and why people believe them. In addition to publishing two books, *American Conspiracy Theories* and *The People's News: Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism*, he has also published articles in journals such as the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Social Science Quarterly*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

#### Jeremy Wallace



Jeremy Wallace is an Associate Professor in the [Department of Government](#) at [Cornell University](#). His research focuses on Chinese and authoritarian politics, with a special interest in authoritarian regime survival, the political economy of development, redistributive politics, the politics of urbanization and geography, and the politics of information. In addition to publishing a book, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China*, he has also published articles in journals such as the *Journal of Politics*, *China Quarterly*, and the *British Journal of Political Science*. More information can be found at his [website](#) and on his [Google scholar profile](#).

#### Jenifer M. Whitten-Woodring



Jenifer M. Whitten-Woodring is an Associate Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of Massachusetts-Lowell](#). Her research focuses on the causes and effects of media freedom and the role of the media in repression and dissent. Her current research investigates how media freedom and Internet access influence government respect for human rights, including physical integrity rights, women's political, economic and social rights, workers' rights, and gay rights. She also examines the effects of media freedom and social intolerance on conflict. In addition to publishing a book, *Historical Guide to World Media Freedom*, she has also published articles in journals such as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Communication*, *Political Science Research and Methods*, and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*. More information can be found at her [website](#) and on her [Google scholar profile](#).



## About the Section

The [Organized Section in Comparative Politics](#) is the largest organized section in the American Political Science Association (APSA) with over 1,300 members. The purpose of the Section is to promote the comparative, especially cross-national, study of politics and to integrate the work of comparativists, area studies specialists, and those interested in American politics. The Section organizes panels for APSA's annual meetings; awards annual prizes for best paper, best article, best book, and best data set; and oversees and helps finance the publication of the Newsletter. For more information, please visit the Section's website.

## About the Newsletter

The goal of the Comparative Politics Newsletter is to engender a sense of community among comparative politics scholars around the world. To this end, the Newsletter publishes symposia on various substantive and methodological issues, highlights new data sets of broad appeal, prints short comments from readers in response to materials in the previous issue, and generally informs the community about field-specific developments. Recent symposia have looked at data access and research transparency, populism, the politics of space, and sensitive data. It is published twice a year, once during the Spring and once during the Fall. The Newsletter is currently edited by [Matt Golder](#) and [Sona N. Golder](#) at The Pennsylvania State University.

## How to Subscribe

Subscription to the APSA-CP Newsletter is a benefit to members of the Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association. To join the section, check the appropriate box when joining APSA or renewing your Association membership. You may join the APSA online at <http://www.apsanet.org/content.asp?contentid=4>.

Copyright 2018 [American Political Science Association](#).  
Address: 1527 New Hampshire Ave, NW Washington, DC 20036-1206  
Phone: (202) 483-2512 | Fax: (202) 483-2657 | Email: [apsa@apsanet.org](mailto:apsa@apsanet.org)