

Dissertation Summary: *Manufacturing Dissent: Evaluating the Effect of State-Sponsored Propaganda*

Concerns over propaganda, disinformation, and biased media have grown as technological innovations reduce the cost of spreading false information. Perhaps most striking, it is becoming more apparent that disinformation coming from foreign countries has a greater chance of reaching domestic audiences. These cross-border media networks, some argue, have potentially deleterious impacts on our democracy, with Russian state-sponsored propaganda receiving the most attention in recent years due to the Kremlin's interference in foreign elections. In fact, concern over Russian influence has grown to such a degree that in February 2018, the U.S. State and Defense Departments agreed to spend over \$40 million to combat foreign government-sponsored propaganda.

Yet, despite a concerted effort to counter Russian influence, we lack empirical research measuring the impact of Russian state-sponsored propaganda on individuals' political attitudes. While some work has shown that foreign messages occasionally impact political behavior, others find that propaganda from foreign countries is ineffective or even counterproductive. Unlike previous work on foreign media which focuses on "soft power" and measures audiences' levels of favorability towards countries or specific policies, my dissertation analyzes whether state-sponsored propaganda has subtle effects on international audiences like increasing political cynicism, promoting conspiracy theories, and undermining support for democracy. Not only do I focus on the impact of Russian messages on Western audiences, but I also study the effect of Western media on Russian citizens to assess the influence of international communication in diverse political contexts.

First I assess whether states can use ties to anti-establishment political parties to influence mass public opinion in foreign countries. I rely on cross-national survey data and employ an estimation strategy that follows the same logic as a standard differences-in-differences (DID) strategy to demonstrate that Russia's transnational networks with populist elites in Europe have had little impact on populist voters' foreign policy attitudes. Consequently, I show that creating linkages with populist elites may have given the Kremlin some leverage over European politics, but it may not be an effective mechanism to improve Russia's image.

Second, I tackle the important empirical question of whether Russian state-sponsored media can influence political behavior in the United States. I show that exposure to biased media can increase political cynicism, promote conspiratorial views, and undermine support for democracy even when individuals are aware of the media's bias. In my survey experiments, I focus on four topics that are central to US-Russia relations and have been prominently covered by Russian media: (1) Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election; (2) the Seth Rich conspiracy; (3) the conflict in Ukraine; and (4) the war in Syria. Additionally, I evaluate whether providing warnings about disinformation, revealing the message source, or actively rebutting false political narratives is the better inoculation strategy against foreign state-sponsored propaganda.

The final empirical chapter switches the focus from Russia's active measures to assess the influence of Western media in Russia. While some work suggests that exposure to foreign messages hold can autocratic regimes accountable, alter perceptions of electoral fraud, and

mobilize anti-regime protests, some suggest that attempts to provide voters with information in weak democracies or closed regimes can backfire. In fact, some research suggests that exposure to alternative media can help solidify regime support. I highlight the potential boomerang effects of Western media in non-democratic states using a novel online survey experiment in Russia to test whether critical messages can inadvertently lead to greater support for the regime.

Unlike other survey experiments on biased media, my experiments directly account for selective exposure into foreign media in both democratic and non-democratic states, thereby offering greater external and internal validity. Additionally, by measuring pre-treatment characteristics of individuals, I am able to assess the heterogeneous effects of biased media across individuals with varying political priors and different levels of political awareness. This allows me to both offer more precise estimates of the impact of foreign media as well as identify most receptive audiences.

The ultimate goal of the dissertation is to enhance our understanding of propaganda's subtle influences on political behavior. By examining alternative mechanisms by which biased media influences political attitudes, I integrate the statistical-experimental approach toward biased media in mass communications studies with the historical and critical analysis approach in early propaganda research to put forth a new theory about the conditional effects of biased media and its influence on public opinion and democratic discourse. Finally, with increased attention to the threat of foreign disinformation to U.S. national security, this dissertation is the first to empirically assess the impact of Russian active measures on Western audiences and offer advice on how to best counter this threat.

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