

When Reporting Bad News is a Good Strategy: Autocratic Propaganda and Market Pressures

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Abstract

The prevailing mood among scholars of authoritarianism is now that dictators have embraced the new information technology and have learned to exploit it for their own purposes. The new wave of research on authoritarian politics focuses on autocracies' efforts to limit the exchange of information online, to flood or clutter the internet or social media, or to determine the optimal degree of censorship. Less explored is how media manipulation apparatuses in these regimes are reorganized to respond to more open media environments. Evidence from Russia and other autocracies suggests that state-controlled media in these regimes increasingly operate on the commercial basis, and yet they are extensively employed for propaganda purposes. How do these media solve the trade-offs between commercial and political demands, talking about issues that are important to the public and at the same time pushing government propaganda? How do autocratic regimes ensure that their media maintain certain diversity, but respond consistently and safely to sensitive and delicate news? How is the appropriateness of news determined in a decentralized and complex media system? In my dissertation project, I aim to provide an account of decision-making in such a system and of the role the government plays in responding to sensitive news at the time of social media revolution. Using an extensive data set of news reports from Russian government-controlled media, I aim to examine the degree to which issue intensity and framing of sensitive news respond are coordinated or diversified across state media outlets. Based on these patterns, I will then aim to reconstruct the mechanisms of government interference in this news coverage based on interviews with media insiders. Using this data, I will establish the patterns of state media responses to important, but sensitive news topics. Additionally, I explore when state-controlled media are more likely to borrow themes and ideas from the social media. This research bridges the work on censorship and authoritarian responsiveness to provide an understanding of how autocratic regimes survive in porous information environments

1 Introduction: Porous Censorship and Authoritarian Messaging

2 Autocrats and the Media: Strategies and Trade-offs

In this chapter, I discuss recent contributions to the literature on censorship and on the messages of autocratic propaganda and outline my own theoretical framework.

3 News Coverage Strategies in Authoritarian Media

This chapter provides an overview of the general patterns in the coverage of state-controlled television in Russia, focusing on the intensity of particular issues.

4 State-Controlled Media and the Coverage of Political Opposition

In this chapter, I examine whether pro-government media in Russia are responsive to news on political opposition and to online discussions of these news, as well as how responses change when the opposition ramps up its activity.

5 Responses to Sensitive Topics: General Patterns

Here, I examine several other sensitive issues, such as terrorism, war losses, and corruption, to establish more general patterns of state-controlled media responses and their coordination.

6 Government's Responses to Social Media Discussions

In this chapter, I use modern machine learning techniques to examine the flow of ideas between social media, state-controlled media, and government statements in greater detail to establish when and under what circumstances autocrats borrow themes and issues from public discussions.

7 Coordination Mechanisms in State-Controlled Media

This chapter summarizes the findings from the quantitative analysis of news reports from state-controlled media and social media data and combines it with the data from interviews with Russian journalists and possibly government insiders to provide a systematic account of coordination between state media outlets on sensitive news.