



AFPC Conference: Exploring the “Authoritarian Media” Phenomenon

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On May 22nd, AFPC sponsored a Capitol Hill conference exploring the phenomenon of “authoritarian media” and its implications for U.S. policy. The event, which served as a preview of AFPC’s forthcoming book entitled “Digital Dictators: Media, Authoritarianism, and America’s New Challenge” (available Fall 2018 from Rowman & Littlefield Publishers), featured a keynote address by CEO and Director of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) John F. Lansing. Conference speakers included Donald Jensen of the Center for European Analysis; Peter Mattis of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation; Aykan Erdemir and Varsha Koduvayur of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies former State Department senior advisor David Denehy, BBG Chief Strategy Officer Haroon Ullah, and AFPC Senior Fellow Robert Bole.

Today, the audience heard, the world is witnessing an alarming increase in the manipulation of media by illegitimate and authoritarian regimes. While the most prominent example of this phenomenon may have been the Kremlin’s efforts to influence the 2016 elections via social media, “fake news” and malign Online actors, it is far from the only one. Countries like China, Turkey, Iran and Qatar have all erected robust national efforts to influence media and/or spread disinformation as a way of promoting their own foreign policy interests - and thwarting those of other nations, including the United States. Even non-state actors such as the Islamic State terrorist group have become active in this sphere, and now operate as “digital guerrillas” in their manipulation of new forms of media.

In this increasingly hostile environment, the ideological advantage that the United States enjoyed during the decades of the Cold War is disappearing. In order to remain relevant, the U.S. government needs to upgrade and reform its approach to international media, as well as to take a more proactive approach to shaping media markets in order to diminish authoritarian regimes and support liberal democratic institutions.

What follows is a rapporteur’s summary of their remarks.

Lansing

The world today is witnessing an alarming increase in illegitimate and authoritarian regimes expanding their chokehold on press freedom and basic human rights. The most prominent example of this phenomenon has been the Kremlin efforts to influence the 2016 elections via social media, “fake news” and malign online actors. The goal of this effort was to weaken the American ideal, to divide the American people by distorting truth, and ultimately to undercut fact-based discourse. In coming years, such efforts can be expected to proliferate, as authoritarian regimes increasingly weaponize media platforms and online discourse for their own objectives.

In response, the U.S. government is upgrading and reforming its approach to international media. During the most recent protests in Iran, BBG on-the-ground reporting and media coverage was enormously impactful in shaping perceptions and allowing U.S. policymakers to engage with the Iranian people, and plans are now underway for a new and dynamic 24/7 television channel for Persian-language broadcasting. Similarly, the BBG’s recent initiatives on Russia – including the launch of the “Current Time” and “Polygraph” features – have played an important role in pushing back against the authoritarianism and foreign policy adventurism of the Putin regime.

On a broader level, the BBG is undergoing a market-driven shift to social media and digital reporting. This rebalancing is logical; at 45 million and growing, digital media is the BBG’s fastest-growing audience, and positioning America’s global media networks to be impactful on the dynamic 21st century information battlefield is fundamental to informing, engaging, and connecting people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

Jensen

Russian President Vladimir Putin sees media as an essential tool of preserving domestic power, and has weaponized it in a number of ways at home. The Kremlin’s strategies for control of Russian domestic media include denying airtime to foreign reporters, pressuring individual journalists, and leveraging current market pressures in order to control and shape media narratives. This is taking place not only at a national level, but permeates media control and conduct in the country’s various regions as well. Penetrating this media “bubble” has proven difficult, despite the best efforts of U.S. and international media.

On the international stage, Putin has leveraged media to further his foreign policy objectives. Those goals include forcing the United States out of Europe, undermining both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and protecting Russia's geopolitical sphere of influence. However, Russia cannot be said to have a coherent ideology of its own. Rather, the Kremlin's goal is to maintain any advantage and control, and to undermine the West.

Western vulnerability to Russian disinformation campaigns is significant, but extremely difficult to gauge reliably. This challenge, moreover, will only increase over time, as Russia expands its technical repertoire and becomes adept at new methods by which to manipulate both domestic and international media.

Mattis

Understanding China's conception of national security is essential to grasping how the PRC approaches media. China's 2015 National Security Law defines security as "the relative absence of international or domestic threats to the state's power to govern, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity." This is significant; the Communist Party of China defines security as the absence of threats, rather than the ability to respond to them effectively. This had nudged China's leadership toward preemptive and repressive strategies, including in the media sphere.

Under the rule of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese media ecosystem has become increasingly restrictive, including widespread national censorship and the denial of visas to foreign reporters who cover Chinese affairs. Beijing also recently announced plans to create a "Voice of China," unifying China's three major news companies into a new conglomerate that will articulate a unified propaganda message. Chinese companies, often funded by the Communist Party of China (CPC), have also made significant efforts in purchasing and controlling Chinese-language broadcasting companies around the world in an effort to silence alternative voices. Furthermore, major news sources, such as the Washington Post, regularly run content from the state-controlled China Daily.

The United States must look more at the content emerging from China, especially from sources that were previously independent but have since been purchased by Chinese companies, such as the South China Morning Post. The conventional wisdom that CCP propaganda is ineffective because the Chinese population itself does not believe it. This view, however, is flawed. The content of propaganda is the only measure of the Chinese Communist Party's effectiveness. Rather, its effectiveness can also be gauged by how effective Chinese official disinformation is in muffling other voices coming out of China.

Erdemir

Although Turkey is a NATO member, polls show that Turks see the United States as their country's top national security threat, while they perceive Russia as their primary ally on the world stage. This peculiar attitude is in large part the result of an effective "media capture" campaign carried out by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Following Erdogan's takeover of national media outlets, just seven Turkish media conglomerates came to control 21 out of 29 daily newspapers, and 90 percent of Turkish news circulation. This monopolization is the product of crony relationships, as well as intimidation and hostile takeovers carried out over the past decade-and-a-half. This "media capture," in turn, has led to real societal and political consequences, including media attacks on the president's secular adversaries at home, as well as the propagation of anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Western conspiracies.

In light of Erdogan's recent consolidation of power within Turkey, the weaponization of Turkish media can only be expected to intensify, increasingly targeting Erdogan's global adversaries. The Turkish president will continue to use media to promote his anti-Western worldview and foreign policy objectives, which aim to challenge the liberal world order.

Koduvayur

Qatar's media strategy centers on the infamous pan-Arab news outlet Al-Jazeera. Since its establishment in 1996, Al-Jazeera has successfully redefined television programming throughout the Middle East, and helped Qatar establish itself as a regional heavyweight.

At the outset, Al-Jazeera provided a valuable contribution to regional discourse by airing a wide spectrum of opinions on Middle East issues. Over time, however, the channel has come to play a more negative role in the regional media environment, by providing advocacy and support for a range of radical groups and controversial issues, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to al-Qaeda. Notably, these policies are in line with the attitudes of the Qatari government itself. As such, the channel should be properly understood as part of Qatar's "soft power" strategy.

Over the past year, the crisis between Qatar and its regional neighbors has dominated regional headlines. Al-Jazeera is a big part of this conversation, because shuttering the channel was among the earliest demands made by countries such as Saudi Arabia, which are actively blockading Qatar. So far, the Qatari government has resisted this pressure, but the future of al-Jazeera remains unclear.

Denehy

The contemporary media environment in Iran should properly be understood as a legacy of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution. While Khomeini used the media to great effect in fomenting resentment against the Shah of Iran, following the Revolution he turned on the media and imposed heavy censorship.

Today, Iran is a highly repressive media environment, albeit a fractious one. Media outlets within Iran operate under tight constraints, while arbitrary interpretation of the law and harsh punishments have cowed journalists and reporters into extensive self-censorship. Abroad, meanwhile, Iran has launched an extensive media effort (encompassing multiple broadcast outlets and channels) designed to promote the importance of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the righteousness of the regime's causes, and support for Shi'a elements (including Lebanon's Hezbollah militia).

America's response to Iranian media, in turn, should build on current initiatives by targeting not only people within Iran itself but also media audiences that the Iranian media is actively trying to sway. Moreover, U.S. international media should move beyond merely fact-based news to include content that diminishes the Iranian regime's authority, such as documentation of its corruption and abuses against the population.

Ullah

The Islamic State has marshalled an incredibly effective media strategy, encompassing three main prongs: the production of compelling content, platform agility, and hyper-localization.

At the height of its social media prowess, ISIS supporters represented a networked social media support base, producing over 30,000 pieces of content per day. The group has also innovated in terms of the types of social media it uses, moving beyond Facebook to focus on applications such as Telegram and Sarahah to communicate and convince. Finally, by modulating its content to different audiences, ISIS has succeeded in creating different perceptions of its actions among various groups. Thus, its Arabic-language media production tends to be very positive and focus on the values of religion and good-governance, while its English-language content tends to be far more violent and emphasize the brutality of the group.

In the fight against ISIS, content is extremely important. Popular shows that parody and satirize the group (such as the Saudi television show, *Selfie*) are extremely powerful in diluting the appeal and legitimacy of ISIS. Programming that amplifies the voices of those who have abandoned the Islamic State and its ideology also needs to be prioritized and disseminated among vulnerable populations.

Bole

The media environment that followed the Second World War was shaped largely by Americans and American values. Today, however, the media battle has shifted into the digital domain, while American strategies remain focused on the 20th century. As a result, America's ideological advantage is disappearing.

How can America regain the high ground? In today's new media environment, mere factual reporting will no longer be sufficient to destabilize authoritarian regimes. The media wars of the 21st century are more of a battle for cohesion than a struggle over specific truths or facts. To persevere, America needs a more proactive approach to international media.

Such an approach would, by necessity, help shape media markets to destabilize authoritarian regimes, as well as to support liberal democratic institutions. It also involves making greater investments in the tools of U.S. international media, empowering the production of content that is compelling to a 21st century audience, and steering priorities toward more activity and agility in the digital sphere.