

Manuscript Overview

Fighting for Citizens' Minds:

Autocratic Propaganda in the Information Age

Erin Baggott Carter*

Brett L. Carter†

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

Scholars increasingly seek the origins of autocratic survival in formal political institutions: single party regimes³ or national legislatures populated by regular elections.⁴ For much of the 20th century, however, scholars privileged the role of citizens' beliefs. As Tullock (1987) put it: "As long as people think that the dictator's power is secure, it is secure." If citizens' beliefs in the autocrat's power were critical to sustaining it, so too, these scholars concluded, could rapid shifts in citizens' beliefs bring an autocrat down. In this, scholars drew on the stunning ease with which the 20th century's most durable autocrats were toppled. Kuran (1989, 1991) famously explained the Soviet Union's dramatic collapse by applying "tipping point" models of collective action.⁵

If Goebbels is correct, then modern autocrats should be at a profound disadvantage in the battle for their citizens' minds. Two decades ago, less than 1% of the world's population enjoyed internet

*Assistant Professor, School of International Relations, University of Southern California. baggott@usc.edu.

†Assistant Professor, School of International Relations, University of Southern California. blcarter@usc.edu.

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

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

³Brownlee (2007), Slater (2010), Svoboda (2012).

⁴Lust-Okar (2006), Magaloni (2008), Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Gandhi (2008), Wright (2008), Blaydes (2008), Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009).

⁵See also Lohmann (1993).

access; today, roughly 40% does. Each passing second registers more than 50,000 Google searches and 2.5m emails.⁶ The challenges that the Information Age poses to the world’s autocrats are compounded by Western governments, who pressure autocrats to permit independent media. As a result, citizens around the world are cognizant of democratic norms and their governments’ failures to abide them. In Africa, for instance, where internet access remains limited, citizens Google their democratic aspirations – with words “democracy,” “human rights,” and “constitution” – more than anywhere else in the world.

How do autocrats employ propaganda in the Information Age? Our basic answer is that the world’s autocrats cultivate the appearance of neutrality so that, during moments of crisis, they have some hope of manipulating their citizens’ beliefs. This insight explains a range of otherwise puzzling aspects of autocratic propaganda. We show that the vast majority of autocratic propaganda newspapers provide strikingly neutral regime coverage for the vast majority of the calendar year, as do state-affiliated newspapers in the world’s democracies. The set of issues on which state-run newspapers focus is also remarkably similar to the set of issues covered by their democratic counterparts: heavy on legitimate economic and foreign coverage, light on threats of repression. The exception to this general trend is on temporal windows that have traditionally been associated with collective action. The calendar of propaganda, in short, is driven by the calendar of protest. We find evidence of learning: temporal windows associated with collective action in years past are associated with propaganda spikes in years hence. We find evidence of strategic interaction between autocratic propaganda newspapers and leading independent newspapers. We find systematic variation in baseline propaganda levels across autocracies, which corresponds to the regime’s ability to control the flow of information. We also find evidence that these propaganda strategies work: that propaganda reduces the rate of popular protest, and that the most profound effects are generated by sustained propaganda over time.

We draw on an original dataset of more than 100 state-run newspapers in five languages from across the world: in short, every state-run newspaper that we could identify and obtain. Our corpus encompasses nearly 100 countries and roughly 20 million unique articles. To create the dataset, we collected state-run newspapers by scraping their online archives using the Python programming language, or by downloading them from Lexis Nexis. We then employed a series of computational techniques to create measures of propaganda for key political actors in a given country and categorize articles by substantive issue area. The result is a day-level dataset that records a range of information about coverage tone and topic across state-run newspapers in autocracies, their counterparts in democracies, and, in several countries, the independent newspapers against which they strategize.

⁶These statistics are drawn from www.internetlivestats.com.

Annotated Table of Contents

Part I. State-Run Newspapers: Variation and Explanation

Chapter 1. Beliefs and Information in a Globalized World

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

Chapter 2. State-Run Newspapers Around the World

This chapter provides an overview of state-run newspapers around the world: which countries have them and, if so, how many they have. After presenting baseline descriptive statistics, we show that the volume of propaganda exhibits tremendous variation across and within regime type.

Chapter 3. Theory

This chapter develops a formal model of propaganda, which builds on recent work by Gehlbach and Sonin (2014), Little (2015), and Gehlbach, Svulik and Sonin (2016). We focus on two objectives of propaganda: to shape citizens beliefs about regime performance, and to shape citizens beliefs about their neighbors' beliefs about regime performance. Though similar, these two purposes force propaganda apparatuses to employ legitimate news coverage in different ways. In turn, the theory yields a series of predictions about the mix of legitimate news and pro-regime propaganda according to the role of elections, citizens' access to alternative information sources, and the autocrat's recourse to repression.

Part II. Focal Points and Propaganda Calendars

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

Chapter 4. Election Season Politics

The vast majority of the world's autocrats now abide nominally democratic institutions. The regular elections occasioned by these institutions constitute focal points for popular protest. In this set of autocracies, the propaganda calendar is driven by the electoral calendar. We show that propaganda in autocracies is generally neutral, save for the 15 days prior to an election, when positive coverage of the regime triples. This increase is driven not by more effusive articles, but an increase in the share of articles about the regime. Consequently, the aggregate volume of pro-regime coverage increases, but per article positive coverage does not. Save for election seasons, state-run newspapers in autocracies are nearly *indistinguishable* from state-affiliated newspapers in democracies.

Chapter 5. Anniversary Politics

Although many of the world's autocracies organize regular elections, the most populous autocracy

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

Part III. Propaganda Strategies and Cross-Country Variation

Part II focuses on variation in baseline propaganda rates *across* countries. We explore whether these baseline rates are driven by the prevailing information landscape, how propaganda apparatuses strategize against independent newspapers, and which issues areas autocratic propaganda apparatuses report.

Chapter 6. Explaining Baseline Propaganda Rates

From Chapter 5, state-run newspapers in autocracies are generally indistinguishable from state-affiliated newspapers in democracies outside of election seasons. In Chapter 6, we document important variation in baseline propaganda rates. We show that this variation is associated with both regime type and the availability of alternative sources of information. This is consistent, we argue, with a model of propaganda in which coverage is constrained by the regime’s ability to control the informational environment. We illustrate the theory with a case study of Gabon, where the *L’Union* newspaper has served as the Bongo family propaganda newspaper since the 1970s.

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

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

Chapter 8. The Politics of Comparison, Negativity, and Threat

Chapter 8 focuses on the content of propaganda. We explore three such facets: when autocrats employ comparison frames to justify their performance, when they disparage opposition leaders and other countries, and when they use propaganda to disseminate threats of violence.

Part IV. Does Propaganda Work

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

Chapter 9. Propaganda and Protest in Africa’s Autocracies

We answer this question in two parts. First, in Chapter 9, we focus on the African continent, where day-level records of protest exist due to the efforts of Salehyan et al. (2012). Since propaganda is strategic, autocrats who employ it may be systematically different than those who do not, and in ways that are correlated with protest. Accordingly, we probe how *changes* in the volume of propaganda over time affect changes in the daily probability of protest. We find that propaganda has indeed diminished the probability of protest, and that its effects persist over time. By increasing the level of pro-regime propaganda by one standard deviation, autocrats have reduced the probability of protest the following day by 8%. The half-life of this effect is between 4 and 12 days, and between 10% and 20% of the initial effect persists after one month. This temporal persistence is remarkably consistent with campaign advertisements in democracies.

Chapter 10. Propaganda and Protest in China

Chapter 9 accommodates autocrat-level selection bias by focusing on how changes in propaganda condition changes in the rate of protest. It is possible, however, that within-country rates of propaganda and protest could be driven by some unobserved temporal factor. To be clear, we expect this *temporal* selection to render the findings in Chapter 9 *less likely*: If propaganda and protest are both driven by underlying political instability, then the estimated relationship should be negative, not positive. Still, in this chapter we exploit the size and ethnic fragmentation of the People’s Republic of China, a country of 1.4 billion people, to obtain a measure of propaganda that is “as if random.” We exploit the fact that Chinese propaganda is set at the national level, but must respond to local political conditions. These local political conditions are often extremely different across communities: Holidays that are politically sensitive in some ethnic communities are virtually unknown in others, yet all citizens are simultaneously exposed to the same propaganda. Again, we find that propaganda has diminished the rate of protest.

Chapter 11. Conclusion

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

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