

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## The New Propaganda

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Controlling information in a globalized world is harder than it used to be, much to the dismay of authoritarian regimes.

Yet such regimes today routinely use the trappings of democracy and the latest technology to stifle liberty. Finding it much harder to control information in a world of instant, decentralized communications, these regimes are using the Internet, elections, the media, and, to some extent, the market to consolidate their power. Those are the findings of a recent study by the London-based Legatum Institute. The study looks at the experiences of China, Turkey, Syria, and Venezuela, but its findings are relevant in much of the developing world and emerging markets.

It is well known that Bolivarian Venezuela -- first under the leadership of Hugo Chavez and now under Nicolas Maduro -- has been a pioneer in employing democratic formalism to consolidate the state's power and trample citizens' fundamental rights. Elections, though often manipulated, have contributed to the government's narrative of legitimacy. Daniel Lansberg-Rodriguez, one of the study's authors, documents the extent to which the regime has used this tool.

Hugo Chavez's successful change of the Venezuelan constitution in 1999 was followed by a constant cycle of national elections -- one a year on average. That put the country in a permanent campaign mode, in which the regime's use of state resources put the opposition at a great disadvantage. As part of that "campaign," Chavez made 2,000 television appearances during his first 11 years as president.

The *Chavista* regime has achieved near total control over the media, through direct state control, regulation, intimidation, and help from allies who buy media companies and then cease to criticize the government.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this state propaganda -- besides its high production quality -- is its disconnection from reality. Venezuelans routinely experience blackouts, runaway inflation, violence, and widespread shortages of basic and other goods. Yet, official TV stations feature discussions of a possible invasion by the United States, and of why standing in line is good for you, for example.

The same phenomenon is happening in Syria, according to Abigail Fielding-Smith, another of the report's authors. Even as Syrians suffer through a disastrous civil war, state television features incredible reports on how well the country is doing. In China, there is access to multiple sources of information and people don't necessarily believe the state media. The point of these regimes' new propaganda is not so much to indoctrinate or make people believe the official line,

but to let the populace know that the state retains enough control that it can easily propagate absurd notions and have them repeated by people who either depend on those regimes or feel intimidated by them.

Flooding the media with officially approved "news" stories that diverge wildly from the facts -- as Russia has been doing regarding its war in Ukraine -- and having them cited by some independent media isn't meant so much to convince people of these stories' veracity, but rather to sow confusion and cast doubt on any other news story.

Neo-authoritarian censorship need not be absolute to be effective. There are millions of Chinese government critics online, but what does get censored, according to a recent study by Harvard University scholars, is any information that could facilitate organizing collective protests. Something similar happened in Ecuador recently. The government of President Rafael Correa -- whom the Inter-American Press Association has called "the great censor of the Americas" -- intercepted some opposition figures' private communications on WhatsApp and broadcast the contents on state television, in order to discourage more of the massive protests that were erupting across the country.

It didn't stop the protests, but it is worth keeping an eye on how far Ecuador and other "democracies" take these new forms of disinformation. Authoritarian regimes tend to mismanage their economies, and sooner or later reality intrudes, whether in the form of recession or otherwise, that is too painful to ignore even by erstwhile regime allies, making autocratic control even more challenging. That looks to be happening in today's Venezuela. With the global slowdown and the end of the commodity boom that sustained such regimes, we can expect the world's authoritarians to run into increasing difficulty imposing their power, much less their views, on their societies.

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