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BEYOND PROPAGANDA | JUNE 2015

The New Authoritarians: Ruling Through Disinformation

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The Legatum Institute would like to thank the Legatum Foundation for their sponsorship and for making this report possible.

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INTRODUCTION

by Peter Pomerantsev



Pity the poor propagandist! Back in the 20th century it was a lot easier to control an authoritarian country's hearts and minds. All domestic media could be directed out of a government office. Foreign media could be jammed. Borders were sealed, and your population couldn't witness the successes of a rival system. You had a clear narrative with at least a theoretically enticing vision of social justice or national superiority, one strong enough to fend off the seductions of liberal democracy and capitalism. Anyone who disagreed could be isolated, silenced, and suppressed.

Those were the halcyon days of what the Chinese call "thought work"—and Soviets called the "engineering of human souls". And until recently, it seemed as if they were gone forever. Today's smart phones and laptops mean any citizen can be their own little media centre. Borders are more open. Western films, cars, and search engines permeate virtually everywhere. All regimes are experimenting with at least some version of capitalism, which theoretically means that everyone has more in common.

But the pieces in this publication lay out a different story. Neo-authoritarian, "hybrid", and illiberal democratic regimes in countries such as Venezuela, Turkey, China, Syria and Russia have not given up on propaganda, they have found completely new ways of pursuing it. Many of them use the technologies invented in the democratic world. Why fight the information age and globalisation when you can use it?

Often, the techniques are quite subtle. Analysing the real-time censorship of 1,382 Chinese websites during the first half of 2011—11,382,221 posts in all—researchers from Harvard University¹ found that the government's propagandists did in fact tolerate criticism of politicians and policies. But they immediately censored any online attempts to organise collective protests, including some which were not necessarily critical of the regime. One heavily censored event, for example, was meant to highlight fears that nuclear spillage from Japan would reach China.

That analysis made clear that the government's priority is not to stop all criticism, but to undermine the self-organising potential of society. "The Chinese people are individually free but collectively in chains," the Harvard study concludes. Indeed, the Internet has turned out to be a useful tool of control: it allows people to "blow off steam", and also gives the government a barometer to measure public opinion.

Elections can also serve as an authoritarian tool. As Venezuelan journalist Daniel Lansberg-Rodríguez recounts, Hugo Chávez would have elections so often that the opposition, which lacked the same level of funding and media access, never had the chance to compete. Chávez averaged some 40 hours of direct media time a week,² including his own variety show, *Aló Presidente*, which ran every Sunday for as many hours as Chávez required. The show allowed Chávez to share his views on anything from baseball to George W. Bush; to answer phone calls from the populace; to share personal anecdotes, fire ministers, announce the start of wars or burst into song. International celebrities such as Naomi Campbell, Danny Glover and Sean Penn would appear on the show, lending their star power to the Chávez brand of permanent socialist revolution.

Meanwhile, Chávez and his successor, Maduro, would “drape censorship in the glove of the invisible hand” to muzzle dissent. Instead of shutting down critical media, they would simply make sure that they would fail. “First,” writes Lansberg-Rodríguez,

media outlets were regulated so as to become economically uncompetitive: a newspaper, for example, might be denied a favourable exchange rate for importing printing paper; a broadcaster might regularly be hit with fines on spurious charges of libel or indecency. Second, once the business started to fail, a dummy corporation, sometimes owned anonymously, mysteriously appeared and offered to buy it out, often at a generous price. Third, despite initially guaranteeing that the editorial line would remain unchanged, the new management soon began shedding staff and shifting coverage until its message became all but indistinguishable from the Panglossian views of the ruling party.³

A similar formula was applied in Turkey, where Recep Erdoğan has also managed to skilfully integrate crony capitalism into his authoritarian media management. As Berivan Orucoglu reports, companies whose media businesses are sympathetic to the government win handsome state contracts in other sectors. Companies whose media are critical of the government lose government tenders and become targets of tax investigations.

For opponents this new propaganda can be hard to resist, particularly as the counter-narrative has become so much more elusive. In the 20th century the democratic capitalism of the West had a powerful answer to Soviet totalitarianism: free markets, free culture, and free politics. Mercedes, merchant banking, rock ‘n’ roll, and parliament were a more attractive proposition than Ladas, the Five Year Plan, the Red Army Choir, and the Politburo. But today’s neo-authoritarians are offering a new deal; you can have the trappings of a Western lifestyle—all the German cars, reality shows, Naomi Campbells, and blue-chip shares you desire—while having none of the political freedoms of the West, and indeed despising the West.

A particularly bizarre example of this are the Night Wolves,³ the Russian Hell’s Angels sponsored by the Kremlin, who were instrumental in the annexation of Crimea. The Night Wolves tap into Western “cool”, riding around on Harley-Davidsons and hosting huge concerts with German heavy-metal music. At the same time they worship Stalin and Putin, and call openly for the resurrection of the Russian Empire. Along similar lines, Gary Rawnsley describes how Chinese propagandists, less colourful but equally liquid in their approach to ideology, “project deliberately contradictory messages”. Today’s Chinese “Communist” Party champions the Cultural Revolution as well as Confucius, and praises the stocks and shares of Shanghai alongside Maoist songs.

Clearly, simple indoctrination is not the only goal. In a 2014 study, Haifeng Huang of the University of California looked at the political attitudes of students at one of China’s “key national universities” (kept anonymous for the sake of security). Analysing 1,250 responses, Huang’s research showed that

while students who attend propaganda courses might not believe the government is “good”, they do believe it is “strong”. “A sufficient amount of propaganda can serve to demonstrate a regime’s strength in maintaining social control and political order,” argues Huang.⁵ He calls this propaganda a form of “signalling” rather than “indoctrination”: the point is to intimidate, not to convince anyone of an ideological message.

Something like this is also at work in Syria. In her classic study, *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen⁶ tried to understand why Syrians living under Hafez al-Assad’s rule in the 1990s would repeat some of the regime’s palpably absurd claims, for example that Assad was the country’s “greatest pharmacist”. Wedeen concluded that the falseness was the point: “the regime’s power resides in its ability to impose national fictions and to make people say and do what they otherwise would not. This obedience makes people complicit; it entangles them in self-enforcing relations of domination.”

According to Abigail Fielding-Smith, Bashar al-Assad, Hafez’s successor, now seeks to reimpose this model of complicity. The revolution against Bashar began in February 2011, when teenagers painted slogans about the Arab Spring on a wall in the town of Deraa. The security services’ reaction—the arrest and torture of the teens—seemed extreme. But it followed from the logic of the regime, which requires citizens to demonstrate fake loyalty, however absurd. Any breach in the code becomes powerfully subversive.

Today, official Syrian television continues to show unbelievably positive stories about the country’s progress, although everyone knows about the devastating civil war, whether through friends and relatives at the front or from the numerous alternative sources of media, satellite and online. But the regime is largely unbothered by this fact. As Fielding-Smith explains, in September 2011 Syrian TV tried to undermine the Al Jazeera broadcasts of protests in Syrian cities by claiming that Qatar had built life-sized replicas of their main squares,⁷ in order to stage fake protests there, which were then allegedly filmed by French, American, and Israeli directors. The goal, according to one Syrian journalist, is not to convince people that this bizarre story is true: “The aim is to confuse people”, to make it hard to understand what is true and what is false.⁸

Assad isn’t alone in this. Many of the new authoritarians have realised that in the 21st century you don’t need to censor information all of the time, and you can’t do it anyway. But you can create enough disinformation to spoil the media space and prevent people from understanding what is happening. In Turkey, Erdoğan has created a conspiracy-mongering Twitter-bot squadron numbering in the tens of thousands. The Chinese have the so-called “50 Cent Party”⁹—online scribes who are paid 50 cents for every pro-regime comment they post. The Kremlin uses “troll factories” to post pro-Kremlin messages and slander critics in Russia and abroad.¹⁰

And the result? Take the Baltics, with their large ethnic Russian minorities exposed to radically different realities through local and Kremlin media. Ethnic Russians living in the country who watch both Kremlin and Estonian channels end up disbelieving both sides, and struggle to form an opinion.¹¹ If anything, Russian Baltic audiences are more drawn towards Kremlin sources because they are more emotional and entertaining, offering them fantasies, invented tales of Russian children crucified by Ukrainian militants, for example.¹² Respondents in focus groups among ethnic Russian audiences in Latvia said that news on Russian TV channels “are emotionally attractive, because some news you watch as an exciting movie. You don’t trust it, but watch it gladly.”¹³

If there is a competition between different versions of reality, in other words, the side which is less constrained by the truth may be more likely to win. But if this is the case, then the entire premise of liberal media is undermined. We have long believed that more information means better decisions, and better democracy. If disinformation becomes a deluge, this may no longer be the case.

Alarmingly this is a problem we are seeing throughout the world, not least in the US where different sides of the political spectrum have begun to split into separate realities, and where disinformation about such stories as Democrat health care reform including “death panels” for the elderly, or that President Obama was born outside the US, have become common.

The papers gathered here make a strong case; today’s autocrats, “illiberal democrats”, and their propagandists have learnt how to use phenomena previously associated with democracy—elections, the Internet, the press, the market—to undermine freedoms. They have learnt how to disrupt the soft power of liberal democracy with a liquid and disruptive treatment of ideology. And they do so by using Western technology and Western money. While the EU and the US government decry the amount of disinformation, aggression, and war-mongering on Kremlin TV channels, it is worth keeping in mind that many of these networks are kept afloat by revenue made from Western advertising.

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ALÓ PRESIDENTE!

VENEZUELA'S REALITY SHOW AUTHORITARIANISM

by Daniel Lansberg-Rodríguez



Hugo Chávez's 14-year stint at the helm of Venezuela's revolutionary government produced many uncertainties for its population: a new constitution, radical reforms, unprecedented inflation, and a veritable boom in street crime and urban violence, to name but a few. Yet for most of that time one thing was always certain. Every Sunday viewers could watch Chávez's television talk-show *Aló Presidente*, an eclectic mix of variety show, televangelical preaching, real-time government, and musical extravaganza.

Broadcast on the state television channel Venezolana de Televisión, Chávez would use the show to share his views on matters ranging from baseball picks to geopolitics, answer phone calls from the populace, share personal anecdotes, or spout his trademark fiery ideological pedagogy, liberally peppered with outbursts of song. During the show Chávez would expropriate businesses, renounce Venezuelan membership of international associations, and expel ambassadors; he might even indulge in mobilising troops to the Colombian border or announce modifications to the flag, currency, and other national symbols.¹ *Aló Presidente* represented a window into the events and decisions, taking place in real time, a reality show where events would affect the lives of the viewers.

Chávez would also use the show to reward his supporters with gifts and patronage, deciding, if not matters of life and death, then at least the destinies of individual citizens by doling out everything from scholarships and jobs to cooking supplies, all to thunderous applause. As social media became increasingly important, Chávez also turned to Twitter. In early 2013, when a 20-year-old college student became the four-millionth follower of @chavezcandanga, Chávez's Twitter account, he was awarded a new house as a prize.² Footage of ostentatious presidential generosity became a ubiquitous hallmark of *Aló Presidente*, a ready reminder to Venezuelans of the benefits of working with the regime, contrasted in the same shows with fiery threats, invectives, and even arrest orders against those who broke rank. By regularly chastising, replacing, and firing ministers on air, a clear message was sent to the viewer that the government's many failures were due to poor execution, on the part of Chávez's incompetent minions, of his otherwise infallible plans.

Scapegoating was a mainstay: claiming, for example, that an important bridge was felled by El Niño (not lack of maintenance); that periods of scarcity were the result of hoarders or speculators (not economic mismanagement); or that the lights went out across the country because an iguana had somehow got loose in the electrical mainframe.³ Conspiratorial scare tactics likewise abounded: shadowy opposition intrigues were alleged; CIA cabals brandished "cancer injections"⁴ and "earthquake rays";⁵ Coke Zero (but not other Coca-Cola products) was accused of being poisonous.⁶ And on top of it all there were cautionary tales such as the story of a once-thriving civilisation on Mars brought low by the adoption of capitalism.⁷

Ironically, Chávez's extensive state media empire, while excoriating capitalism, often wielded many of its best-known commercial and marketing tricks in pushing its main product: Chávez himself. Foreign heads of state and left-leaning international celebrities, such as Naomi Campbell, Danny Glover, and Sean Penn, would appear on the show, lending their star power to the Chávez brand of permanent revolution.

After Chávez's 1999 constitution parsed out the electoral calendar, Venezuela found itself, on average, with at least one national election a year, leaving the (usually) liquidity-rich national government in a state of more or less permanent campaigning. This perpetual electioneering put opponents of the regime, unable to match the government in terms of spending power, at a structural disadvantage, but it also meant the government could never enact policies without instantaneous payoff. For Chávez, *Aló Presidente* represented the perfect populist vehicle: keeping him in the public eye and helping to define the political agenda, as well as the media conversation, for the coming week.

When the Sunday afternoon format proved too limiting, Chávez became heavily reliant on *cadenas*, a type of broadcast permitted under Venezuelan law that gives presidents a constitutional prerogative to seize airtime on every radio and TV station for use in emergencies, or to broadcast major events such as the Venezuelan equivalent of the US's yearly State of the Union speech. Undeterred by convention, Chávez began serially invoking the law to deliver multi-hour speeches, meticulously timed to moments when opposition leaders were making speeches elsewhere. According to one estimate, Chávez resorted to 2,000 *cadenas* during his first 11 years as president, averaging out at one every two days or so.⁸ From late 1999 onwards, Chávez—through *Aló Presidente* and the *cadenas*, as well as by means of regular interviews with favoured journalists—was averaging nearly 40 hours of direct personal media time a week.⁹

SOCIALIST IN CONTENT, CAPITALIST IN FORM

Safely removed from the oversight of the media, it was often behind closed doors that actual national governance took place. High government posts and mysterious arbitrage fortunes were awarded to the families and retainers of his closest associates, resulting in a new breed of socialist tycoon known domestically as “Boligarchs” or “Boliburgesses”.

In 2014 Freedom House rated the press in Venezuela as among the least free globally, ranking it 171st out of 197 countries.¹⁰ This poor showing, landing it below countries such as Singapore, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe (and nearly on a par with Russia), was the lowest in the hemisphere apart from Cuba. In contrast, back in 2002 it was ranked 86th, and back in 1992 (before they started the numerical rankings) it was considered “free”, a designation then granted to less than a third of the 204 countries reviewed.¹¹ The 2014 *Legatum Prosperity Index*TM—a measure that encompasses metrics such as the rule of law, civil liberties, and other personal freedoms—saw Venezuela receive the third-lowest score in the region.¹²

Following Chávez's reinstatement in the wake of an attempted coup against him in 2002, which major TV channels supported, any prior pretence of civility between the independent media and the state was dropped entirely, and the formerly tense relationship became openly adversarial. *Cadenas* became even more popular, and Chávez relied on them to rail openly against the four main private stations. The four most prominent private networks—RCTV, Globovisión, Venevisión, and Televen—were particularly singled out, with Chávez labelling them “*los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis*”—the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The 2004 Law on Social Responsibility on Radio and Television (known as RESORTE, from its Spanish acronym) banned any content from private media that might “incite or promote hatred”, “disrespect authorities”, “constitute war propaganda”, “foment anxiety”, or “disrupt public order” vaguely worded and subjective restrictions through which pliant Chavista courts could impose severe fines and

penalties for unflattering stories. The following year, the Venezuelan penal code was likewise reformed, extending the definition and breadth of defamation laws to include public officials: under the new code “defaming” the president could result in a criminal sentence of over two years. In 2010 RESORTE was amended and extended to include electronic media.

Two of the Horsemen, Venevisión and Televen, soon succumbed to this new regimen of fines and legal pressures, duly softening their editorial line, taking critical voices off the air, and focusing news coverage more on tabloid issues, celebrity coverage, sports, and human interest, rather than hard news. RCTV, the most popular and oldest television broadcaster in the country, was simply dismantled. As its 20-year broadcasting licence came up for renewal—usually a formality—in May 2007, CONATEL, the Venezuelan communications authority, headed by Diosdado Cabello (Chávez’s vice-president during the failed 2002 coup), announced that the licence would not be renewed.¹³ Despite considerable public backlash and international condemnation, as well as a last-minute concession by the station’s ownership that it too would toe the official line, setting an example was deemed more valuable. RCTV stopped broadcasting forever at midnight on May 28, 2007, and its equipment was nationalised to create a new government-owned broadcaster TVES.

VIVA CHÁVEZ

By the time the final episode of *Aló Presidente* was transmitted from Chávez’s home state of Barinas on January 29, 2012, the show had, according to government figures, logged nearly 657 hours of airtime spread over 14 years.¹⁴ The unspecified cancer that would eventually fell the president had by then sapped much of the former army commander’s vigour. Gone was the trademark charismatic hyperactivity so critical to his populist government’s survival since its beginnings, and his failing health had by then made the transmission of *Aló Presidente* intermittent and the episodes themselves significantly shorter. It was an underwhelming coda to what had once been the most popular programme on Venezuelan television, averaging a robust four to five percent of national television viewership for much of its existence and sporadically spiking to up to three times that amount for extended periods of time.¹⁵

Old episodes and highlights specials of *Aló Presidente* are still regularly repeated on Venezuelan state television, more than two years after his death, albeit under the “Aló Comandante” label, and it remains one of the most viewed programmes on state television. Attempts by others to fill the void left by *Aló Presidente* produced consistently underwhelming results. Chávez’s handpicked presidential successor Nicolás Maduro, his wife, National Assembly chief Diosdado Cabello, and other major players in the regime have attempted to take up the mantle with their own shows in similar formats. Buoyant depictions of local events have included shows about “why waiting in line is good for you”, “street danger is a matter of perception”, and “oil production is up and up!”, and there have been celebrity endorsements from known commodities such as Oliver Stone and Maradona.¹⁶ The armed forces, the *colectivos*, and various community groups also frequently appear in celebratory official media spots, ostensibly both reinforcing and drawing attention to co-operation between them. But despite such similarities in content, the glut of budget *Aló Presidentes* that have sprung up over the last two years have invariably failed to recreate the magic, not one of them topping even 1 percent of the national audience.¹⁷

For the perennially gaffe-prone and unpopular Maduro, a system designed to run on the personal dynamism of Chávez himself has made for an awkward fit. Chávez's absence is palpable within this system specifically tailored to channel his larger-than-life persona at its core. Though he may be dead, state television remains rife with invocations of Chávez: regular documentaries about his life, his speeches broadcast on every channel, music videos showing Chávez and Maduro spending time together,¹⁸ even breathy musical oaths of loyalty sung by daughters of other prominent Chavistas. The government has likewise promoted the use of larger-than-life posthumous titles and monikers for Chávez—including such honorifics as "the Giant" and "the Eternal One"—to complement the title "El Comandante" that Chávez actually used in life.

Immediately after his death, Chávez was embalmed, and his mummified cadaver is due to be placed within a "crystal urn" in a yet-to-be-completed Caracas museum, so that the people can "see him for eternity". The late president's signature, visage, or even his disembodied stare are ubiquitously displayed around the Venezuelan capital, appearing far more frequently than do images of Maduro himself. In September 2014 the Socialist Party Congress in Venezuela even began with a prayer to Chávez, modelled on the Catholic "Our Father" prayer but with the words changed:

Our Chávez who art in heaven, earth, the ocean and within us, the delegates, hallowed be thy name, let your legacy come to us, that we may bring it to the people both here and there. Give us each day your guiding light, and lead us not into the temptations of capitalism, and deliver us from the evil oligarchy, and of the smugglers and hoarders, because ours is the homeland, peace and life. For ever and ever, amen. Viva Chávez.¹⁹

Making no attempt to force his way into the revolutionary pantheon alongside Bolívar and Chávez, Maduro has instead chosen to predicate his own legitimacy on the prospect of Chávez's semi-deified infallibility, since it was Chávez himself who chose Maduro as his successor.

NARRATIVE STRUGGLES

Just as Maduro has tried to continue Chávez's television formats, so also is he continuing his grand narrative. The message of Chavismo is similar in various respects to that of other revolutionary authoritarian Marxist systems: the span of history is reinterpreted into a grand narrative of redemptive revolution, repackaged as a simplified set of crucial dates and figures towards the inevitable (and thus intrinsically legitimate) status quo. In its purest form, this official mythology sees Venezuelan independence hero Simón Bolívar as a direct precursor to Hugo Chávez, having fought bravely for independence, social equality, and freedom for the *pueblo*, only to be cynically betrayed by capitalist landed elites.

Subsequent Venezuelan history is simplified into two centuries under the unholy yoke of wealthy oligarchs and perfidious foreigners, who raped the country of her national wealth and brutalised her people, until the arrival of Hugo Chávez on the political scene. According to this narrative, Bolívar's great mantle was subsequently taken on by a variety of precursors: Argentina's Perón, Chile's Allende, Che, Castro—all of them eventually brought down by imperialist and oligarchic trickery (assassinations, coups, embargos) until Chávez was able to prevail. The failed coup attempts by Chávez and his supporters in the early 1990s, his own brief overthrow in 2002, the subsequent national oil strike and media wars: all were trials within a heroic narrative. Chávez's triumph over adversity is put forth as the

seminal event of a new empowerment of Venezuela's working-class poor, and it is treated as being inevitable, yet inherently fragile. The message is clear: without the revolution, there can be no empowerment, and many are seeking to undermine it so as to return Venezuela to enslavement and humiliation.

The world-view that results is rigidly dualistic, almost Manichean in nature, and Venezuela's pro-government rhetoric is heavily reliant on loaded terms whose meanings, on either side of the eternal battle, effectively become blurred into one. On the side of good are "*el pueblo*" (the people), "*la patria*" (the homeland), socialism, revolution, the global left, liberty, sovereignty, Latin America. Representing evil are "imperialists", "the United States", "oligarchs", "the CIA", "international elites", "ultra-rightists", "mainstream media", "fascists", "Zionists"—all of which can be used interchangeably as attack words, singly or paired together, to denote any enemy that criticises or meddles in Venezuelan government affairs.

Not everyone, however, would buy into the Chavez name-calling. In 2007 Chávez was ignominiously told to "shut up" by Juan Carlos I, king of Spain. A catalyst to this royal shushing were comments from Chávez in which he accused former Spanish president José María Aznar, a proponent of classical laissez-faire neo-liberal policies, of being a fascist. While terms like "fascism" have become generalised attack terms for the Venezuelan regime, in Spain—after 35 years of real fascist rule under Franco—the word carries a good deal more weight. Surprisingly, for a brief period following the king's command, Chávez was indeed shocked into an uncharacteristic silence²⁰ (It is worth noting that recordings of Juan Carlos's "*¿Por qué no te callas?*" quip became one of Venezuela's most popular ringtones.)

Maduro's administration still relies upon a version of Chávez's own grand narrative, but the tone has changed, becoming less hopeful and more paranoid. According to a tally by Colombia's NTN24 network, Maduro has claimed to have uncovered and foiled at least 17 separate coup attempts against him.²¹ He regularly announces imminent threats of invasion and sabotage by a broad range of seemingly intractable enemies. To hammer home the message, the government relies on supportive statements from allied regimes as "proof",²² while Maduro has taken to paranoid theatrics such as showing up at the April 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama with exaggerated and showy security personnel, a body double, and—at times it seemed—a bulletproof vest.²³ This siege mentality makes it easier for the government to pass the buck for regime failures in areas such as crime prevention and the economy, or else to justify increasingly authoritarian social controls.²⁴

Since Chávez's death, media controls have become more powerful, if at times less direct. Despite his socialist rhetoric, Maduro found the best way to control independent media was to use the invisible hand of capitalism to conceal censorship. The free market was used as a cudgel: the government simply had its friends buy up the media.

Often media outlets were regulated so as to become economically uncompetitive: a newspaper, for example, might be denied a favourable exchange rate for importing printing paper; a broadcaster might regularly be hit with fines on spurious charges of libel or indecency. Once the business started to fail, a dummy corporation, sometimes owned anonymously, will mysteriously appear and offer to purchase it, often at a generous price. Finally, despite initially guaranteeing that the editorial line will remain unchanged, the new management soon begins shedding staff, likewise shifting coverage until its message becomes all but indistinguishable from the Panglossian views of the ruling party.

In this fashion, Maduro has also swept away those vestiges of critical media that had survived his predecessor, including Globovisión and major newspapers such as *Últimas Noticias* and *El Universal*

(Venezuela's oldest and most storied newspaper). Those newspapers that remain have also had their impact limited through the government denying them foreign currency with which to import paper. As a result, *Tal Cual*, a leftist publication critical of the regime, had to switch to a weekly format. The paper shortage has likewise made *El Nacional* hard to find on newsstands for non-subscribers, and the paper itself has become much slimmer and advertisement-heavy, with ever more content (including my own column) being published only online.

VENEZUELAN REGIME MEDIA AND ITS EMULATORS

The Venezuelan media model has already had an impact on much of the region, through both emulation and deliberate export. In 2005 Venezuela bankrolled 70 percent of the start-up costs of a new international broadcaster, TeleSUR, and is a 51 percent owner, along with various other friendly governments such as Argentina and Ecuador. Similar to the model of Al Jazeera or RT (Russia Today), TeleSUR claims to create "independent" coverage and, along with Venezuelan English-language news websites, attempts to whitewash regime abuses and failures. TeleSUR focuses on exaggerated coverage of negative events elsewhere, such as racial tensions in Ferguson, Missouri, or unemployment in Spain, and sets up false comparisons, such as equating Venezuelan supermarket queues and queues for the "Black Friday" shopping holiday in the US.

In Ecuador, the Correa government has likewise been cracking down on journalists through increasingly onerous libel laws and fines.²⁵ Independent media conglomerates such as Argentina's Clarín group or Brazil's Globo increasingly find themselves under fire from government authorities. Such governments routinely back each other up publicly, adding credence to their propaganda and jointly discrediting Western media outlets and unallied foreign governments in order to minimise the impact of future criticism. The result of this media assault has been to make the general population suspicious of independent media, and it has given rise to a popular perception that one of the tasks of government is to keep the media under control. A Latinobarómetro survey from 2010 noted that between 25 and 40 percent of the citizenry in most large Latin countries believed that media required presidential controls and that, on average, only around three-quarters of Latin Americans believed that private media should be able to control their editorial line without fear of being shut down by the government.²⁶ In much of the region, popular demands for "media accountability" seem to carry more weight than media demands for government accountability. Meanwhile local versions of *Aló Presidente* are popping up in Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, with heads of state using the format for ad hominem attacks on perceived enemies.²⁷ In Argentina, the Kirchner regime has become increasingly reliant on *cadenas* to get its anti-imperialist message on every screen. Chávez is dead—but the show must go on.

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AFTER GEZI HOW ERDOĞAN USES INFORMATION TO CONTROL SOCIETY

by Berivan Orucoglu



The summer of 2013 saw widespread protests in Turkey, starting with environmental protests and turning into a nationwide riot against the ruling party and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It was the biggest demonstration against the government in recent history and was soon followed by corruption allegations over the Erdoğan family's massive wealth, consisting of huge amounts of cash and luxury houses. Foreign observers who followed the protests closely wondered if the government could survive the mass protests; but the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) not only survived but dominated the local elections in the following year. Erdoğan was elected president with a hefty 52 percent majority. How did he manage to pull it off? Part of the answer lies in his ability to skilfully use disinformation, propaganda, and media to shape the narrative for the larger population, co-opt elites, convince audiences of his competence, and intimidate the opposition.

Instead of facing up to the criticisms of the government, Erdoğan and his supporters went on the front foot; the relentlessly persistent and repetitive disinformation campaign about the Gezi protests was impressive both for the sheer variety of the allegations and for the number of supporting media outlets. AKP members and their friendly media elements revealed the "real reasons" behind the protests. Their conspiracy theories included the usual suspects: traitors, coup-plotters, the CIA, MOSSAD, MI6, Europeans who envied Turkey's economic success, foreign forces in collaboration with terrorist organisations,¹ the "interest rate lobby",² and—not surprisingly—the Jewish lobby. One of Erdoğan's advisers even suggested that foreign powers were trying to kill Erdoğan through telekinesis. Others claimed that the Gezi protests were the work of CNN or the BBC or Reuters or the Serbian civil society organisation Otpor!. In a fake interview,³ CNN's Christiane Amanpour "confessed" to starting the protests "for money". The pro-government media claimed that protesters drank beer in a mosque where they had taken refuge from the police. The mosque's imam denied that the incident ever happened;⁴ he soon ended up exiled to a remote village in the outskirts of Istanbul. There were also lurid claims that protesters had group sex in the mosque; that prostitution and group sex were common in Gezi Park; that dozens of half-naked men had attacked a young head-scarfed woman with a baby, urinating on her in the busy neighbourhood of Kabataş, Istanbul, in broad daylight.⁵ Although every single one of the aforementioned cases of anti-Gezi propaganda, dutifully fabricated by pro-government media and subsequently cited by AKP members, was proved to be false,⁶ the disinformation campaign served its purpose: many AKP voters, to this day, believe the Gezi protests were a terrorist conspiracy against the government.

Just as with its Gezi coverage, the mainstream media avoided focusing on the incriminating evidence of corruption contained in audio recordings between Erdoğan and his son posted online in 2014. After the scandal began, Erdoğan even held the former US ambassador to Turkey, Francis Riccardone, responsible: after accusing the ambassador publicly of engaging in "provocative actions",⁷ Erdoğan actually threatened to declare him *persona non grata*. On the first anniversary of the corruption investigation, Interior Minister Ekan Ala hinted that Israel was behind it all.⁸

HOW TO MUZZLE THE MEDIA

How does Erdoğan keep such strict control over the mainstream media? Freedom House lists the following means of suppression:⁹

- » **Co-opting media owners**
Holding companies sympathetic to the government receive billions of dollars in government contracts, often through government bodies housed in the prime minister's office. Companies with media outlets critical of the government have been targets of tax investigations or forced to pay large fines.
- » **Intimidation of journalists**
Erdoğan frequently attacks journalists who write critical commentary. In several well-known cases, like those of Hasan Cemal and Nuray Mert, journalists have lost their jobs after these public attacks. Government-aligned sympathetic courts hand out convictions in defamation cases for any criticism. The latest example took place in March 2015, when a court sentenced two cartoonists to 11 months and 20 days in prison for insulting Erdoğan.¹⁰ Later the court changed the jail sentence to a fine. Neither does Erdoğan limit himself to Turkish journalists. Many local and international journalists have been verbally attacked by Erdoğan himself or government-friendly outlets. Ivan Watson, a CNN correspondent, was publicly shamed following his brief detainment by Turkish police while covering a story in Istanbul's famous Taksim Square, on the first anniversary of the Gezi protests. In 2014 *Der Spiegel* removed their correspondent Hasnain Kazim from Turkey after receiving "hundreds of death threats" following his critical report of the Soma mine disaster.
- » **Mass firings**
At least 59 journalists were fired or forced out in retaliation for their coverage of the Gezi protests. The December 2013 corruption scandal produced another string of firings of prominent columnists.
- » **Wiretapping**
The National Security Organisation has wiretapped journalists covering national security stories, using false names on warrants in order to avoid judicial scrutiny.
- » **Imprisonment**
Dozens of journalists remain imprisoned under broadly defined anti-terrorism laws.

A side-effect of Turkish media being intimidated by government is that Turks no longer trust the media. The 2014 Pew Survey shows that only 32 percent of Turks have favourable opinions of the media.¹¹ Although "positive media influence" shows a six percent gain compared to 2007 data, the majority still think that the media has a negative impact. However, as Sergei Guriev of Sciences Po pointed out in a recent paper, 21st-century autocrats can use propaganda not to "re-engineer human souls" but to reinforce their "performance legitimacy", using the media to project "a perceived competence at securing prosperity and defending the nation against external threat".¹²

THE BATTLE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Controlling the traditional media has not always proved enough to silence the masses who oppose Erdoğan and the AKP. As is the case globally, millennials (or Generation Y) in Turkey depend on social media as their main source of information. Some 92 percent of Turkey's online population now use social media, the highest share in the world.¹³ In the first days of the Gezi protests, when the mainstream media failed to even mention, let alone report on, the protesters calling for Erdoğan's resignation, social media became the critical means of communication among the protesters. They used Twitter and Facebook to share information on how to survive during the protests and provided minute-by-minute updates on events all around Turkey. Photographs and videos of the protests were shared on Flickr, Tumblr, and video sites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Thanks to the images and information posted instantly through smart phones, the protests were fairly well co-ordinated and succeeded in attracting the international media's attention.

Not to be left too far behind, the government decided to form its own "social media army" immediately after the Gezi protests.¹⁴ The party hired no fewer than 6,000 social media experts, hoping to co-ordinate a "response plan against online activists critical of Turkish officials". During the Gezi protests, Erdoğan had spoken of a "robot-lobby", which he accused of tarnishing Turkey's international image. Within a year the AKP had doubled its social media experts and now controls an impressive Twitter-bot army numbering in the tens of thousands.

But despite the government's strenuous efforts to shape the narrative on social media, outlets such as Twitter and YouTube once again came to centre-stage during the 2013 leaks about Erdoğan's family and high-level AKP officials' alleged corruption scandals. The anonymous leakers were believed to be followers of the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen—and were quickly slurred by the government as a shadowy group (though just two years earlier the Gülenists had been one of the strongest supporters of the ruling party, and their support had been reciprocated at the highest level). The Gülenists relied heavily on Twitter to leak the recordings, prompting an enraged Erdoğan to vow that he would "wipe out" the micro-blogging network. Shortly after the corruption scandal broke, Twitter and YouTube were banned in Turkey. The ban was subsequently overturned by the Constitutional Court, but that has not prevented the government from working hard to further restrict freedom of speech on the Internet. For example, the parliament has approved legislation authorising the government to block websites without prior judicial decree.

PLAYING THE RELIGION CARD

As well as media intimidation, Erdoğan has used religion to cement his power. While AKP officials usually claim that they do not impose their values on others, the education system is becoming more religious by the day.¹⁵ Many public schools were converted into religious Imam Hatip vocational high schools. The sole purpose of these schools when they were first established was to train an adequate number of well-informed, scholarly prayer leaders to serve in mosques, and only males were admitted because—in Islam—only males qualify for the vocation. In the 1970s girls began to be admitted to these schools, although they could not serve as imams. In 2002 the number of graduates of Imam Hatip schools was 70,000. Today, the official number is close to

a million, and more than half of the students are female. Graduates of these schools have been favoured with government-service positions unrelated to their vocational training, and mosques have become a natural venue for government propaganda.

In a country where 98 percent of the population is Muslim, the religious card is always an effective political tool. With his religious and oratorical training as an imam, religiosity is Erdoğan's natural weapon of choice. A deputy of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Şafak Pavey once said:

Erdoğan is winning because of the enormous strength of a religious ideology which controls the past and the future. For Erdoğan, temporal power is only an accessory. He believes that he possesses divine power. His magic is his ability to convince voters that he is God's deputy on earth.

AKP Bursa lawmaker Hüseyin Şahin said that "touching our esteemed prime minister [Erdoğan], trust me, I believe is a prayer"; AKP Düzce deputy Fevai Arslan said he is "a leader who possesses all attributes of Allah"; AKP Aydın provincial director Ismail Hakki Eser said, "We are in love with our prime minister. Our prime minister is like a second prophet for us"; Oktay Saral, a former mayor who now serves as an AKP Istanbul deputy, said in February 2010 that "a two-rakat thank you prayer should be performed to Erdoğan every day".

This religious aura has several strategic aims. First, it helps put Erdoğan above rational criticism, corruption allegations, and censure caused by U-turns in policy. The religion card has class appeal too. Polls show that lower-income groups, who are generally more conservative with respect to Islam, and those without secondary education are more likely to vote for the AKP, to believe that the country is on the right track, and to oppose the Gezi protests.¹⁶

A key element in Erdoğan's religious narrative is the idea of victimisation, playing on the fact that in the past political Islamists were treated with prejudice by the Kemalist army. Opposition leaders fail to understand how after more than 12 years in power Erdoğan still manages to convince his constituency that they are a victimised group and that he is the one being victimised most of all, but the narrative trick is used over and over: if it is not the Kemalist army victimising political Islamists, it is the international conspiracy.

But while Erdoğan finds it easy to play the religion card against rivals like the opposition CHP, using this particular weapon against his long-time ally-turned-enemy Fethullah Gülen is almost like going against the laws of nature. When they parted company, Erdoğan tried to portray Gülen and his followers as "bad Muslims". But many AKP members respect Gülen as a religious scholar and leader, and suddenly had difficulty aligning themselves with Erdoğan. A furious Erdoğan began a clean-up operation which would leave only "anti- Gülenists" in the party to run in the elections on June 7.¹⁷ Despite his efforts, the ruling AKP failed, for the first time, to win an outright majority, its biggest setback in 13 years.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

When media manipulation, intimidation, and the religious narrative fail, Erdoğan is always ready to use co-option, offering subsidies and unlimited possibilities to supporters: all perfectly legitimate as far as the letter of the law goes. Having neutralised opposition with mass prosecutions, disseminating disinformation about them, electronically seizing their assets, and depriving them of work, the regime grants public bids to government-friendly businessmen and distributes free goods to people just before elections. Perhaps the most ironic gesture from the government took place in 2009 when Tekin Geze, a resident of Tunceli Province, who was unemployed and had not paid his electricity bills for six months, received a free refrigerator and a washing machine.¹⁸

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THOUGHT WORK IN CHINA

by Gary Rawnsley



The Chinese Communist Party has always seen propaganda, known as “thought work”, as key to controlling society. Co-ordinated by a standing member of the Politburo, propaganda reaches down through every layer of the state and society, with the military, education, and the arts all mobilised as vehicles for the dissemination of centrally determined messages. But today China’s propagandists are facing new challenges. One is ideological. In an age when the Communist Party is curating a form of capitalism, what does the Party stand for? How should it secure loyalty? What sort of central message should it project? The second is technological. The Internet is designed to challenge centralised control and accelerate horizontal communication, whereas the Chinese state remains a rigidly vertical power structure.¹

LIQUID IDEOLOGY AND SIGNALLING

As China modernises, propaganda is an important means of maintaining stability and national cohesion, especially as the creation of the market economy with “Chinese characteristics” has generated a range of challenges—corruption, poor environmental management, uneven development, problems created by mass migration, unemployment, a widening wealth gap—that might spark popular unrest. To stay on top of the game, Communist Party propagandists project deliberately contradictory messages: emphasising the appeal of history, tradition, and culture, while also striving to project a picture of a modern, dynamic, and transforming China; remembering China’s status as “victim” during the so-called “Century of Humiliation”, while also communicating self-confidence in China’s growing superiority.² Propaganda chief Lu Yunshan has demanded the creation of a “spiritual civilisation” to help nurture Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream”. But the definition of the Chinese Dream is deliberately vague, embracing everything from a “spirit of rejuvenation” through to the recent revival of low-tech old-fashioned propaganda posters.

The government communicates these often contradictory themes across all media platforms. Inspired directly by Britain’s New Labour party and its handling of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in 2001, China’s central government created a new cadre of Communist Party spin doctors and a system of official spokespersons at every level of government. In the late 1990s, the American PR firm, Hill and Knowlton, was asked to advise China’s media managers, while since 2001, communication experts from Qinghua University in Beijing have used the Blair model in training programmes designed for China’s propaganda officials.³ Recent incidents have tested this propaganda machinery. In 2008 alone, the Tibet uprising, the Sichuan earthquake, and the Beijing Olympic Games generated a whole new set of challenges for news management. China was praised for the way the government allowed foreign journalists access to Sichuan to report on the earthquake, but was criticised for stifling coverage of poorly built schools and housing. Chinese propaganda tries to be open and to accommodate the demands of the new information environment—and sometimes acknowledges that it is necessary for the sake of credibility to reveal the bad news along with the good—but it seems that old habits die hard and the system still cannot tolerate criticism of policymaking at the highest levels of government.

Media aside, education continues to be a vehicle for the dissemination of the government's agenda, with schools ordered not to spread Western values, and universities required to promote Marxism, China's traditional culture, and socialist values. Clearly the government is convinced that the Internet generation is in need of cultural and spiritual instruction.

Given the openly contradictory nature of Communist Party messaging, the vapid definition of the Chinese Dream, and the increasing amount of opportunity to access alternative points of view, to what extent is anyone buying the regime's narratives?

A 2014 study by Haifeng Huang of the University of California grappled with this question by examining the political attitudes of students who have attended propaganda courses at a Chinese university (though Huang does not name the university for security reasons, it is described as "one of the key national universities under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education").⁴ Analysing 1,250 responses to a specially designed questionnaire, Huang's research showed that "those students with more exposure to the courses, in the sense of being able to recollect more teachings from past courses, will be more likely to believe that the government is strong, but not more likely to believe that the government is good". The research implies that, though Chinese students do not necessarily believe the propaganda being thrown at them, its very presence and consistency act as a signal to deter dissent. As Huang argues:

A sufficient amount of propaganda can serve to demonstrate a regime's strength in maintaining social control and political order, thus deterring citizens from challenging the government, even if the content of the propaganda itself does not induce pro-government attitudes or values. This can explain why authoritarian governments are willing to spend an enormous amount of resources on propaganda activities, the content of which often does not persuade the intended recipients.

A WORLD WIDE WEB WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

The aim of the regime's use of the Internet can be similarly counterintuitive.

The Chinese government is using ever more innovative methods of managing the flow of information into, around, and out of China, especially as new communications technologies shatter spatial and temporal constraints, challenge all governments' national sovereignty, and blur the distinction between author, publisher, and audience of news and information. The Chinese government has developed methods of supervising the flow of information over the Internet to block "unhealthy content". These methods include the famous Gold Shield Project (otherwise known as the Great Firewall); a system of filtering keywords typed into search engines; blocking access to particularly sensitive websites; and cracking down on access to Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). An army of around 30,000 people monitors the Internet in China, a sign of the commitment devoted to sustaining this part of the propaganda system.⁵ Moreover, the government has created around 60 laws and regulations to administer the use of, and access to, the Internet. In 2009 the government launched a crackdown on websites (including Google and Baidu) displaying, or with links to, "vulgar" content.⁶ This was followed in 2010 by the "anti-three vulgarities" campaign, again focusing on websites that attack morality and the core values of Chinese society.

A number of social media have been established that offer Chinese versions of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and micro-blogging sites: Weibo, Youku, 51.com, Kaixin001.com, Douban, QQ, and Renren, among others, have attracted millions of Chinese users denied access to their Western counterparts. Developing Chinese versions of social media sites allows for greater central management over the media, the message, and the user, while satisfying demand for popular participation in online communities. This system is reinforced by less sophisticated methods of managing information on the Internet that try to encourage a climate of fear and hence self-censorship among users, for example by requiring them to register in their own names and thus bypassing the anonymity that has been a political force in many countries. Users are fully aware that they live in a surveillance society and are explicitly warned of the dangers of accessing unhealthy content or forbidden websites. Cyber cafés are held responsible for the activities of their patrons, thus extending the system of control down through society.

In addition to managing the technology and imposing on users a climate conducive to self-censorship, the government manages content by spinning the online discourse in ways that are favourable to the regime. The most renowned development has been the 50 Cent Party—Internet-literate youths who trawl the web for negative news and opinion, then refute it with positive information; they are paid 50 Chinese cents for each posting.⁷ One commentator, Anne-Marie Brady, describes such innovations as “the re-birth and modernization of the Chinese propaganda state”.⁸

Muzzling discontent, however, is near-impossible in the Internet age. In the aftermath of the Wenzhou high-speed train crash in 2011, for example, when 39 people died and 200 were injured, leaked directives from the Propaganda Department ordered journalists not to investigate the causes of the crash, and footage emerged of bulldozers shovelling dirt over carriages in a literal attempt to cover up the accident. But the frenzy of activity on micro-blogging sites attacking the government’s attempts to stifle reports of the disaster demonstrates that, despite their best attempts, central authorities cannot completely control either the communications technology or the narrative.

Simply killing all criticism, however, may not be the regime’s ultimate aim, as new research shows that in their censorship strategy the authorities could be playing a more subtle game. Analysing the real-time censorship of 11,382,221 posts from 1,382 Chinese websites during the first half of 2011, Garry King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts of Harvard University found that

when the Chinese people write scathing criticisms of their government and its leaders, the probability that their post will be censored does not increase. Instead, we find that the purpose of the censorship program is to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected.⁹

The research showed that, while criticism of policies and political personalities is tolerated, the regime used aggressive online censorship to counter certain events such as protests in Inner Mongolia after a coal truck driver killed a herder and riots by migrant workers in Zengcheng. Some of the most censored potential collective-action events were not actually critical of the regime. Following the Japanese earthquake in 2011 and the subsequent meltdown of the nuclear plant in Fukushima, a rumour spread through Zhejiang province that the iodine in salt would protect people from radiation exposure, and a rush to buy salt ensued. Although the rumour had nothing to do with the state, it was highly censored, apparently “because of the localized control of collective

expression by actors other than the government”.¹⁰ Other highly censored posts were on a local Wenzhou website expressing support for Chen Fei, an environmental activist who supported local environmental protection. Chen Fei is actually supported by the central government, but all posts supporting him on the local website are censored, probably because of his record of organising collective action. King, Pan, and Roberts conclude:

The evidence suggests that when the leadership allowed social media to flourish in the country, they also allowed the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders ... [B]ut, as they seem to recognize, looking bad does not threaten their hold on power so long as they manage to eliminate discussions associated with events that have collective action potential. With respect to this type of speech, the Chinese people are individually free but collectively in chains.

Indeed, rather than being a tool for catalysing democracy, the Chinese regime has managed to turn the Internet into an implement to monitor and thus better control society. “So long as collective action is prevented, social media can be an excellent way to obtain effective measures of the views of the populace about specific public policies and experiences with the many parts of Chinese government and the performance of public officials,” argue the Harvard researchers:

As such, this loosening up on the constraints on public expression may, at the same time, be an effective governmental tool in learning how to satisfy, and ultimately mollify, the masses. From this perspective, the surprising empirical patterns we discover may well be a theoretically optimal strategy for a regime to use social media to maintain a hold on power.

CYBER NATIONALISM

The use of propaganda as signalling and the counterintuitive use of the Internet show the dextrous nature of Chinese propaganda strategy. But when it comes to the question of nationalism, the regime is on hotter, if not shakier, ground.

Young people, usually cynical about other creeds pushed out by the regime, have been particularly vulnerable to the renaissance of Chinese nationalism. It compensates for the decline in commitment to communist ideological principles and offers a distraction from the social problems generated by the rapid transformation of the economic system. Despite the many alternative sources of information China’s citizens can access, they remain plugged into the nationalism promoted by official propaganda networks, and any criticism of the Chinese government, especially from outside its borders, is viewed as criticism of the country as a whole. This was most visible in the pro-Tibet protests during the Olympic torch relay in 2008, when nationalist propaganda mobilised communities around the world to demonstrate in support of the Chinese government and against the perceived anti-China bias in Western media. But while this can strengthen the regime, the nationalist discourse online can also force the government’s hand.

In April 2001, for example, when the Chinese air force shot down a US reconnaissance plane over Hainan, online nationalists urged the regime to respond hard. According to veteran China watcher Willy Wo Lap Lam, working for Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post* at the time, China’s

President Jiang Zemin issued instructions to keep things calm and avoid a repeat of the anti-US demonstrations that occurred after NATO's accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.¹¹ John Pomfret, writing for the *Washington Post*, observed how "the government this time has moved swiftly to censor nationalist rhetoric from internet bulletin boards or keep a tighter than usual rein on the state run press".¹² In other words, the Chinese people were being reassured: 'the regime will handle this problem.' However, Jiang Zemin's response prompted a wave of criticism of the government, especially among intellectual elites and cyber nationalists. "Many Chinese cyber nationalists responded by moving to chat rooms such as Sina.com," wrote Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang, "where they fervently decried the state's suppression of their nationalist views."¹³ Protests, unreported in the traditional Chinese media, erupted against the government's soft attitude, with slogans claiming: "China is a coward. President Jiang Zemin must step down." Facing this barrage of popular nationalist criticism, the government decided to take a harder line against the US.¹⁴

The regime's propagandists are thus stuck in a paradox. On the one hand, they need to promote nationalism as the one message that can emotionally bind the nation, and the youth especially. But because of the nature of the Internet, this nationalism ends up running ahead of the state's own propaganda, with the result that the regime loses control and has to play catch-up with the outpouring of nationalist emotions among the younger generation expressing their views on Chinese social media.

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ASSAD'S "AS IF"

by Abigail Fielding-Smith



On 9 May 2015, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) website carried the following headlines on its home page:

"Homs clock ticks again, declaring the return of life to the old city"

"Army foils terrorist attack in Deraa"

"Mikdad: Legendary struggle of Syria is an outcome of its people's achievements"

"Syria wins gold medal in the high jump in Moscow Open Cup"

But reality was far less rosy than the SANA headlines suggested. In the preceding weeks, rebels had captured a provincial capital, the Syrian pound had plummeted in value, and cracks had appeared within the highest echelons of the security establishment.

At first glance, the SANA headlines seem like the stereotypical behaviour of an authoritarian government (and indeed of a few liberal-democratic ones), trying to hoodwink people into believing the regime is stronger and more competent than it actually is. On closer inspection, however, this does not seem adequate motivation. Syrian citizens have access to a range of websites and satellite channels offering a portrait of the country different to SANA's. Moreover, they know things are going badly in the fighting when soldiers from their town or village do not come home. Indeed, President Bashar al-Assad himself acknowledged military "setbacks" in a public address on 6 May 2015.

If simple persuasion or indoctrination is not the aim, what is the function of these slickly produced state news items, whose production values suggest a surprising degree of financial commitment when the government is running out of money? After more than four years of a devastating war of attrition, there cannot be many people even inside the fortress of Damascus who look around them and see the Syria depicted on state news—a land where the army is always "thwarting" terrorists and the citizens are at leisure to enjoy bicycling championships. So what sort of complex game of signals are the Syrian regime and its population involved in?

THE LEGACY OF HAFEZ

To begin to understand Assad's use of propaganda, we need to go back to the rule of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who seized power in 1970 after a series of destabilising internal coups and filled the top levels of the security establishment with trusted allies. On the face of it, Hafez's position was precarious: he was a rural upstart from the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam in a majority Sunni Muslim country. Yet through the secular ideology of Ba'athism (a hodge-podge of Arab nationalism and socialism) and ruthless suppression of dissent, he managed to fashion the Syrian state in his image.

Legitimacy was derived from Soviet-backed macro-projects, dam-building, and irrigation.

But ministries and parliament were ultimately irrelevant: the state was inseparable from the ubiquitously represented person of Hafez. Outside the presidential household, the official discourse of Ba'athism and hyperbolic praise for the leader was all-permeating, and the penalties for violating it high.

Hafez is notorious for his brutal crushing of an uprising of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, in which thousands of people were killed and the city of Hama flattened. But the fear he engendered spread far beyond that event, through a Stasi-style system which encouraged citizens to inform on each other's behaviour to the intelligence services. "From the moment you leave your house, you ask, what does the regime want?", a Syrian told Lisa Wedeen, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and Middle East specialist.¹ "People repeat what the regime says. The struggle becomes who can praise the government more. People compete ... after 10 years it becomes its own language. Everyone knows who knows the language better and who is willing to use it. Those who are self-respecting say less, but for everyone the language is like a seatbelt."

As Wedeen notes, the claims that this "language" required people to uphold were palpably absurd—that Hafez was the country's premier pharmacist, for example. And unlike O'Brien, the torturer in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who breaks Winston Smith until he truly believes that two plus two equals five, the regime did not seem interested in creating genuine conviction, merely the external appearance of it—what Wedeen calls "a politics of 'as if'". Disbelief in the official pieties was registered in jokes and even some slyly encoded commentaries that made it into the public sphere.

After deliberating on why the regime would insist on the external trappings of loyalty, Wedeen concludes that the falseness is itself the point. "The regime's power resides in its ability to impose national fictions and to make people say and do what they otherwise would not," she writes. "This obedience makes people complicit; it entangles them in self-enforcing relations of domination, thereby making it hard for participants to see themselves simply as victims of the state's caprices."

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

When Bashar came to power after his father's death in 2000, he was seen as a breath of fresh air. He helped introduce the Internet to Syria and presided over some limited but nonetheless tangible reforms. There was a little more tolerance of grumbling, so long as it did not touch on the president himself, and a little less heavy-handedness. "We used to get sent to prison for writing things that caused offence," said one journalist in 2005. "Now we only have to pay a fine!"²

Bashar himself seemed to be popular, greeted with fervent applause wherever he went, though the politics of "as if" make it hard to tell how deeply rooted this popularity was.³ For the urban middle classes at least, he represented their aspirations for Syria. One woman, shopping in a Damascus mall in 2011, shook her head in wonder as she recalled the privations of the pre-reform economy: "there were no diapers, no milk, no bananas. We only had oranges and apples!"⁴

Despite the slight relaxation, the logic underpinning the regime was the same, and when the rules of its game were violated, it responded with disproportionate ferocity. When, in March 2011, a group of teenagers graffitied a wall in the southern town of Deraa with slogans from the Egyptian revolution, the security services arrested and later tortured them. Protests erupted at the teenagers' treatment, quickly spreading to other parts of the country. Increasingly, the protesters focused on the symbols

of the regime. In video after video uploaded to YouTube, posters of Bashar were torched and statues of Hafez hacked down in a campaign of visual “cleansing” (*hamlat al tathir*). The pact of the “as if”, on which the power of the Syrian regime rested, was being repudiated.

It was nearly two weeks into the escalating cycle of protests and crackdowns before Assad made a public statement about the unrest. Optimists hoped that this young, Western-educated president would offer historic concessions, an inclusive vision to save the country. In the event, however, Assad’s address to parliament on 30 March 2011 merely repeated the familiar rhetoric about reform and Syria being the subject of an international “conspiracy”, claiming the protests and crackdowns had been manipulated in order to undermine Syria’s role as a “resistance” state. The parliamentarians applauded him, but even non-opposition Syrians were shocked at how little the speech offered. One Christian businessman told *The Guardian* that the speech had left the Ba’ath party “empty-handed” as it faced the Syrian people.⁵

Apart from some initial conciliatory gestures, Assad did not invest much political capital in trying to win back the rural Sunni majority: his speeches seem to have been primarily aimed at bolstering his supporters—Alawites, Shia, Christians, and the urban middle classes. Joshua Landis, a historian of Syria, argues that given the decades of repression that had preceded it, Assad was bound to act this way: “If Assad had done what he should have done”, i.e. offer meaningful concessions, “there would have been revenge, his cronies would have been hung from the wall,” he said. “So many people know who killed their brothers and who tortured them and they would all want justice.”

Right from the start both sides were involved in a war of perception. The opposition wanted to create the impression that the momentum was with them and the regime was reverting to barbarism in response, while the regime needed to make people feel that the unrest was contained and their response was proportionate and responsible.

To impose his narrative, Assad could not simply censor people, preventing them from seeing videos of protests and crackdowns recorded by activists: satellite dishes carrying foreign news channels were everywhere. In any case the videos were all over the Internet. But while he could not censor, Assad could cause people to question the veracity of the opposition’s material. To achieve this, pro-Assad media described foreign news channels as part of a “conspiracy” against the regime. A cartoon, pinned to the wall of the Syrian border-control office at the crossing point from Lebanon, depicted Syria as a dove of peace surrounded by guns marked “Al Jazeera”, “Al Arabiya”, and “France 24”. In September 2011, the pro-government Addounia TV station even claimed that Qatar had built life-sized replicas of the main squares of Syria’s cities in order to stage protests there, which were then filmed by French, American, and Israeli directors.⁶ As a Syrian journalist quoted in the *Financial Times* explained, the aim of such outlandish claims was not so much to convince people that they were true as to pollute the epistemological landscape. “The aim is to confuse people,” the journalist said. “It is not even necessary for people to believe it, just as long as it makes them confused and unsure about what is really going on.”

Assad’s confusion strategy was helped by the fact that pan-Arab channels were indeed owned by the elites of gulf countries who eventually became openly committed to the overthrow of his regime. It has also helped that elements of the opposition have undoubtedly circulated false claims at various points to bolster their narrative.⁷ Post-uprising Syria seems a good illustration of the theory that the availability of large quantities of information can actually help a regime stay in power, provided that the information is unreliable.⁸ This logic has also helped the regime internationally.

In interviews with the international media, Assad has unequivocally denied using either chemical weapons or barrel bombs against his own people. So firm are his denials, and so polarised the international media landscape in which they occur, that credible evidence implicating the regime put forward by human rights organisations ends up becoming just more noise in the din.

Few have done more to amplify that din than Assad's allies in Moscow. When, for example, the world was first digesting news of what appeared to be a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, RT (Russia Today) ran a feature suggesting that the YouTube videos of the victims were fabricated in advance because their date stamp was one day before the attack was supposed to have occurred. As was quickly pointed out, YouTube videos are stamped with California time, ten hours behind Damascus.⁹

Back home, as the civil war has continued, the regime's domestic priority has been to convince forces to fight. The army is thought to have been reduced by half following mass desertions and casualties,¹⁰ and the regime has relied heavily on irregular forces, largely from the Alawite community, supplemented by Shia fighters from Lebanon and Iraq. The regime has traditionally abjured sectarian discourse in its official channels, yet at the same time it depends for its foot-soldiers on the sense of community and the perception of shared threat that sectarian identity creates. By late 2013 evidence of this sectarian mobilisation was all over Damascus: the flag of the Lebanese Shia militia was hoisted over a vanquished suburb, and pendants depicting the sword of the Shia martyr Ali with Assad's face superimposed on the hilt were on sale in the souks.

Yet even as the regime was outsourcing vital state security functions to sectarian militias, "Sunni" and "Alawite" remained taboo words in the official media, the well-known reality (in this case of sectarianism) once again being ignored. The usefulness of this kind of coverage to the regime is that it signals the ongoing presence of the state. It may be fear of getting massacred by Islamist gunmen that prompts Alawites to fight, but they need to feel that what they are fighting for is a state, not a sectarian warlord: a long-running sectarian war can only end badly for the minority sect.

And so, even as the coercive power that allowed the regime to impose its version of reality frays and the state itself withers, official media go on in the traditional style, not out of denial but as an evocation of the fictions that bound the country together for so long.

EGYPT

In Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the former army chief voted president after ousting the country's democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi, is in a very different position to Assad. The state has deeper roots in Egypt than in Syria, institutions have some actual power, the country is much more religiously homogenous, and Sisi himself enjoys significant public support. But the power of crowds over presidents has been tasted, and anyone ruling over 80 million people with an aid-dependent budget and an unstable relationship with other centres of power within the state needs to keep a close eye on the mood. As in Syria, stagecraft has played an important role.

The coup itself was spectacularly well scripted, with Sisi making his televised announcement flanked by liberal leader Mohamed ElBaradei, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar University, the Coptic pope, and youth activists. Having the air force trail heart shapes in the sky was a detail some Hollywood directors might have considered too much, but it seemed to go down well.

For all the professionalism of the pageant, there is something strangely studied and derivative about Sisi's public image. He has implicitly compared himself to Gamal Abdel Nasser, the iconic army officer whose leadership saw Egypt's influence peak. It is an identification his supporters have taken up enthusiastically in a million memes and posters of the two men side by side. Yet, as various commentators have pointed out, there is nothing particularly Nasserist about Sisi's policies, which so far seem to echo the economic neo-liberalism of Hosni Mubarak rather than the defiant socialism of the earlier leader.

The classic strongman signals do not only come from Sisi's association with Nasser. Shortly after the July 2013 coup, security forces violently dispersed pro-Muslim Brotherhood protesters in Cairo, killing hundreds. Since the ousting of Morsi and particularly since Sisi was voted president in June 2014, a number of laws have been passed shutting down space for dissent in the name of fighting terror; the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed, protests banned, and media freedoms restricted.

Nonetheless, no ruler's head lies easy in today's Middle East. Mekameleen, a pro-Brotherhood satellite channel based in Turkey, has been broadcasting what it claims are leaked recordings of Sisi's private conversations, causing him huge political embarrassment. His pitch to the Egyptian people was stability, and the war on terror is not going all that well—hundreds of policemen have been killed by a Sinai-based insurgency since the ousting of Morsi. The economy is improving but still critically dependent on Gulf handouts. In this context, some see Sisi's strongman behaviour as a simulacrum of strength rather than evidence of it. "National unity to the point of xenophobia, cult of personality—they are the classical leitmotifs for regimes that are not strong but feel themselves to be brittle," says Professor Andrea Teti of Aberdeen University.

As Egypt commentator Sarah Carr points out, four years of instability have created an audience eager to believe in the performance. The army's narrative of recent events has stuck, she writes, and it is not simply because of its undoubted influence over the media: "people themselves want – seemingly need—to believe it."¹¹

The violent tumult of the post-Arab Spring environment and the associated rise of border-spanning sectarian identities have shown quite how much state authority is a matter of performance, symbol, and spectacle in parts of the Middle East. There has always been a touch of staginess to the Middle Eastern state. As Nazih Ayubi points out, a preponderance of flags and uniforms can be read as an indicator of weakness rather than strength.¹² In the case of Assad's Syria, the state is more present in the eagle motifs which are supposed to represent it than in most people's lived reality. SANA's plodding stories cloak the charred ruins of cities with the familiar discourse of the Ba'athist state, and with the options as they are in today's Middle East, it is perhaps not surprising that some people continue to act "as if" they believe in it. Sometimes even a fictional state may be preferable to the alternative.

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