

# Firming Up Democracy's Soft Underbelly

## Authoritarian Influence and Media Vulnerability

by Edward Lucas



**National Endowment  
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International Forum for Democratic Studies

## ABOUT THE SHARP POWER AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE SERIES

As globalization deepens integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies. The Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series is an effort to systematically analyze the ways in which leading authoritarian regimes seek to manipulate the political landscape and censor independent expression within democratic settings, and to highlight potential civil society responses.

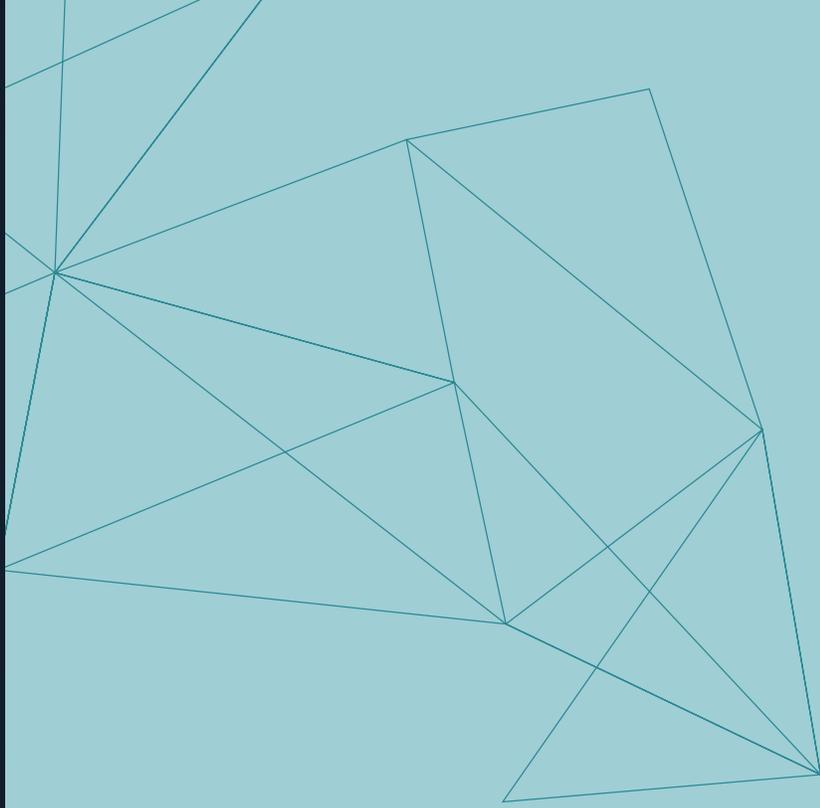
This initiative examines emerging issues in four crucial arenas relating to the integrity and vibrancy of democratic systems:

- Challenges to free expression and the integrity of the media and information space
- Threats to intellectual inquiry
- Contestation over the principles that govern technology
- Leverage of state-driven capital for political and often corrosive purposes

The present era of authoritarian resurgence is taking place during a protracted global democratic downturn that has degraded the confidence of democracies. The leading authoritarians are challenging democracy at the level of ideas, principles, and standards, but only one side seems to be seriously competing in the contest.

Global interdependence has presented complications distinct from those of the Cold War era, which did not afford authoritarian regimes so many opportunities for action within democracies. At home, Beijing, Moscow, and others have used twenty-first-century tools and tactics to reinvigorate censorship and manipulate the media and other independent institutions. Beyond their borders, they utilize educational and cultural initiatives, media outlets, think tanks, private sector initiatives, and other channels of engagement to influence the public sphere for their own purposes, refining their techniques along the way. Such actions increasingly shape intellectual inquiry and the integrity of the media space, as well as affect emerging technologies and the development of norms. Meanwhile, autocrats have utilized their largely hybrid state-capitalist systems to embed themselves in the commerce and economies of democracies in ways that were hardly conceivable in the past.

The new environment requires going beyond the necessary but insufficient tools of legislation, regulation, or other governmental solutions. Democracies possess a critical advantage that authoritarian systems do not—the creativity and solidarity of vibrant civil societies that can help safeguard institutions and reinforce democratic values. Thus, the papers in this series aim to contextualize the nature of sharp power, inventory key authoritarian efforts and domains, and illuminate ideas for non-governmental action that are essential to strengthening democratic resilience.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*The views expressed in this paper represent the opinions and analysis of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or its staff.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes have invested tens of billions of dollars in media enterprises and information initiatives to manipulate, distort, and censor the global information environment. While the perpetrators may have different goals or motives, they often adopt the same tactic: buy what you can—and befuddle the rest.

This report explores how authoritarian regimes, like those in Moscow and Beijing, have exploited democratic norms and transformed the market for information into a dangerous tool to exert antidemocratic sharp power. Under enormous economic and political pressures, independent media are struggling to respond. News outlets face wrenching changes in their business models, driven by technological revolution. And features of the media system once seen only as strengths—such as competition, openness, and fair-mindedness—have also turned out to be weaknesses.

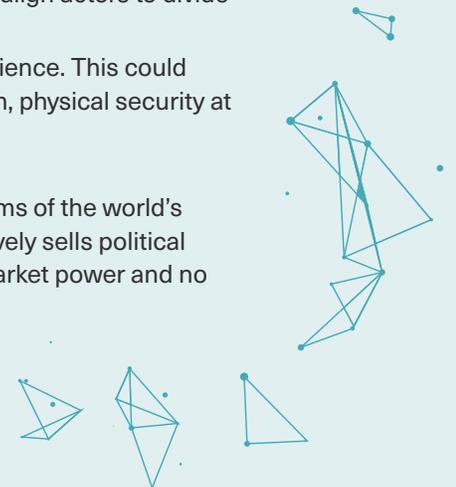
Remedies and deterrents are still available for democratic societies. But an effective response to authoritarian media influence requires an array of normative, legal, and practical changes:

- A blueprint for action on **norm building** is overdue. A common feature of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to pursue the public good in democratic societies, norms must be applied to both consumers and producers in the information space.
- A first step should be the creation of a **charter of responsible practice** with input from professional associations, trade unions, journalism schools, and industry bodies.
- A related effort encourages **discretion in interactions** with problematic media, to increase the social cost of engaging with state-owned propaganda channels.
- In the long term, **media literacy education** offers the best hope of strengthening the immune system of democratic media environments.
- **Statutory regulation** can help to improve the transparency of ownership, including state affiliation. Numerous private sector and nongovernmental initiatives are also developing systems for determining credibility and integrity in online news.

Strengthening media resilience in the face of intimidation similarly requires a combined statutory, normative, and civil society effort:

- Increased **cooperative behavior in response to threats** decreases the effectiveness of authoritarian pressure tactics. A purely competitive approach to the information system allows malign actors to divide and rule.
- Greater **support for individual journalists** is another component of building resilience. This could include a hotline for victims of harassment, support from the criminal justice system, physical security at home and at work, and assistance with legal fees.

No single or simple solution will blunt the impact of sharp power on the information systems of the world's democracies. But allowing commercial pressure alone to dictate information flows effectively sells political decision making to the highest bidder. In a world where hostile state actors enjoy great market power and no accountability, free speech is too important to be left to the free market.



Information is a weapon—and one that can be used against us. This is an uncomfortable truth for open, democratic societies. We like to think that our media ecosystem is self-sustaining.

“Truth will prevail” was the motto of the Czech and Slovak demonstrators against communist rule in 1989.<sup>1</sup> According to this logic, once the dead hand of censorship and monopolistic public ownership was removed, competition and innovation would work in the media industries, just as it did in retail, employment, and other parts of the economy, with the former communist world catching up to the “normal,” advanced, industrialized countries. The market for information is no different, in short, than the market for soap. All the media need, therefore, is to be left alone. Intelligent consumers, market pressure, and public-spirited journalists will do the rest. The only people who should fear the power of the free media are wrongdoers.

That was a dangerous, even fatal misapprehension. The market for soap does not attract the attention of mischief makers and influence peddlers. The information system does. Moreover, the media industries—whether in established industrialized democracies, in their post-communist counterparts, or in emerging economies—are far more vulnerable than we realized in 1989. First, news outlets have faced wrenching changes in their business models that are driven by a technological revolution. Second, features of the media system such as competition, openness, fair-mindedness, and prudence, once seen only as strengths, have also turned out to be weaknesses.

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The underlying fallacy here is the idea that the “marketplace of ideas” works well without any externally imposed structure or sanctions. This is not the case even in the market for soap, and certainly not for information. As Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel-winning economist, noted in the *Financial Times*, “much of the thrust of economics over the past half century has been to understand what regulations are needed to ensure that markets work. We have tort laws that ensure accountability if someone is injured and we don’t allow companies to pollute willy-nilly. We have fraud and advertising laws to protect consumers against deceptions—recognising that such laws circumscribe what individuals may say and publish.”<sup>2</sup> Tobacco companies, for example, cannot say that cigarettes are safe. Pharmaceutical companies cannot say that opioids are not addictive. In the financial markets, regulation ensures equal access to information for investors. All this would apply to soap. But distortions in the marketplace for information are potentially much more damaging. If a consumer buys the wrong kind of personal hygiene product, the risk and cost falls mainly on the individual.

If someone votes on the basis of misinformation, then the whole of society suffers. In economic terminology, such spillover costs are called “externalities.” Stiglitz argues that “without full transparency, without a mechanism for holding participants to account, without equal ability to transmit and receive information, and with unrelenting intimidation, there is no free marketplace of ideas.”

These weaknesses do not just result in imperfect outcomes. They can be exploited by malign actors ranging from politically motivated tycoons to foreign intelligence services. Indeed, as explained below, major authoritarian powers including China and Russia have invested heavily in such efforts. The perpetrators may have somewhat different goals or motives, but they often adopt essentially the same tactics: buy what you can—and befuddle the rest.

In the space of two decades, from the richest countries to the poorest, barriers to entry have collapsed. To be a force in the media world today, you do not need costly transmitters, studios, printing presses, or distribution vans. You do not need a large staff, or indeed any. You do not even need a business model. You can run a national or even global disinformation effort on your wits alone, using a \$50 smartphone and a public Wi-Fi connection, at almost zero marginal cost. You don't even need to give up your day job.

While life has become ever easier for newcomers, it has become ever harder for the incumbents. Collapsing public trust in the media is not a worldwide phenomenon, but it is a common one. The reasons for this erosion, and its extent, are matters of controversy. Among other factors, political polarization makes it harder for media to appear impartial. Lower standards caused by economic stress have harmed quality, meaning more mistakes and worse editorial decisions, which compound the problem. The perception of journalism as an elite profession has broadened the social gulf between consumers and producers of news.

Moreover, the economic rents, or unearned income, that sustained mass media for decades have evaporated in many countries. You do not need to advertise a job, a car, or a retail sale in the print edition of your local broadsheet newspaper. You can reach your customers online, at a cost which is continuing to fall. Nor do you need to advertise with old-style terrestrial broadcasters. It is true that traditional media continue to thrive in some countries: newspaper readership remains high in places including Japan and Germany, where subscribers are apparently more willing to bear the cost of journalism. But these are exceptions. On the whole, mass media are under serious economic pressure, and this leaves them primed for exploitation.

## A MARKET WITH FEW SAFEGUARDS

A central principle of the market economy is that unfettered competition is good. It raises standards, punishing the mediocre and rewarding the innovative and efficient. Only narrow exceptions apply, such as antidumping rules in international trade, or laws meant to ensure consumer health and safety. Assuming these legal thresholds are met, the market is free to work its will.

Limits on market forces are especially rare in the media world. Some countries have rules about foreign ownership. Libel and other defamation laws can also apply. Broadcast regulators may restrict nudity and obscene language, and require that paid commercial content be properly identified. But these rules chiefly apply to "old" media and are lightly enforced. There is no counterpart to antidumping rules that would prevent foreign-subsidized news outlets from competing unfairly with domestic profit-driven enterprises. And there is no equivalent of the US Food and Drug Administration to examine media content for any risks to consumers.

This creates the first vulnerability of our media system, what might be termed faux-commercial competition. News outlets that need to make a profit struggle against competitors that are bankrolled by someone else, be it a tycoon or a government. The subsidies can be delivered directly or in disguised form, such as through advertising or clandestine payments to journalists.

A related weakness is openness to financial intimidation. An independent, for-profit media outlet operates on the basis of prudence. If you habitually offend your big advertisers, you can lose revenue. If you annoy the government, you may find that your journalists are denied access to decision makers, which also carries a commercial cost. If you print official secrets, you may be prosecuted; not only does the editor then risk jail, but the burden of legal fees can be crippling. These are the normal concerns that constrain editorial judgment. But they are all open to abuse. Chinese government pressure on advertisers, for example, can lead to de facto boycotts that cripple or undermine critical

Chinese-language news outlets abroad. In Singapore, the authorities exert pressure on independent media through costly lawsuits.<sup>3</sup> In Hong Kong, many corporate advertisers withhold business from *Apple Daily* and other prodemocracy outlets to avoid the displeasure of mainland Chinese authorities.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, *Apple Daily* is able to survive mainly because it is owned by a strong-willed tycoon, Jimmy Lai, who does not mind losing money for a good cause, and because such outlets enjoy substantial support from likeminded readers.<sup>5</sup>

Others are not so lucky. In common-law jurisdictions that lack US-style First Amendment protections, such as Ireland and England, losing a libel case means not only printing an apology, but also paying damages and the plaintiff's legal fees. Even if the plaintiff's case fails, the defendant news outlet must still spend large sums on its own legal fees, which in most jurisdictions it cannot recover. The typical complainant does not care. His aim is to harass and bully his critics until they decide that writing about his business activities, personal life, or political affiliations is no longer worth the effort.\*

In some cases, the economic weakness may prove transient. At least for media outlets working in big-language markets, in rich countries, and appealing to high-information consumers, new business models are emerging. As the market fragments, it is easier to see where profits lie, and to chase them. Media outlets such as *The Economist*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* are showing how the high-quality news business can thrive, not just survive, in the twenty-first century. If the Chinese or Russian governments tried to finance rivals to these outlets, they would probably fare poorly. The sort of people who read upmarket news are less likely to be fooled by imitations.

But that is little comfort elsewhere in the media ecosystem. Some well-known outlets looking to buttress their revenues have resorted to licensing their brands abroad, where they may become vehicles for propagandistic content. *The Independent*, a British newspaper, entered into such an arrangement with the Saudi Research and Marketing Group, a company that is closely linked to the Saudi monarchy.<sup>6</sup> Britain's Sky News has licensed its brand to the Abu Dhabi Media Investment Corporation, owned by the brother of the United Arab Emirates' de facto ruler. The resulting Sky News Arabia became a vehicle for smears aimed at regional rival Qatar.<sup>7</sup>

If the information systems in well-resourced, established democracies are struggling, the vulnerabilities are all the greater in societies where capacity is weaker, the financial picture is bleaker, and institutional roots are shallower. The greatest exposure to faux-competition is in the media catering to low-information consumers in the size-constrained markets of poor countries. Three European countries that have faced Russian subversion and information operations are North Macedonia,<sup>8</sup> with about two million people; Montenegro,<sup>9</sup> with 620,000; and Moldova,<sup>10</sup> the continent's poorest country, with 3.5 million. It is hard to see how a media outlet can make money by producing responsible, high-quality news in such circumstances. You cannot sell your product outside your country's borders. Your consumers cannot pay much in subscriptions and are not rich or numerous enough to attract much in the way of advertising. Your faux-competitors have none of these worries.

\* This author had firsthand experience of this, when, as a senior editor at *The Economist*, he coordinated the defense in a libel suit brought by an influential Russian businessman with close Kremlin connections. In the courtroom, the businessman's legal team agreed to settle largely on *The Economist's* terms. But the case still cost *The Economist* well over \$750,000 (at 2010 exchange rate and prices). *The Economist* was happy to take that hit—and bear the risk of even greater costs if the case had gone to court. Many financially weaker news outlets would have regarded it as far too costly.

## EXPLOITABLE GAPS IN JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

A second and much deeper weakness in the media systems of open societies lies in their moral and conceptual foundations. Journalism rests on the ethical instincts, usually unstated and uncodified, of the editors and reporters who select and publish stories. What counts as fair? What counts as relevant? What counts as true? These are questions that ultimately lead back to philosophy classes, where the final answers are elusive. But they are the warp and weft of the fabric produced in our news factories.

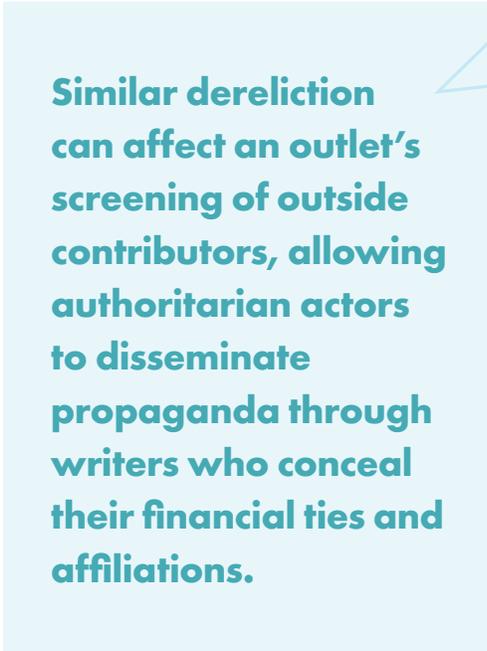
Fair-mindedness is easily abused. One source says it is raining. Another source says it is not raining. The lazy and ostensibly fair-minded approach is to report both assertions. The readers can draw their own conclusions. In fact, this approach is profoundly unfair to readers. The journalist's job is to go and see whether the rain is falling. Is the sidewalk wet? What do passers-by say? The veracity of the contradictory sources can be assessed and explained. What qualifications do they have in meteorology? Have their past predictions and reports been accurate? But this sort of work costs time and money, both of which, outside the rarefied world of high-end journalism, are scarce. It is easier to report "both sides" of the story and move on.

Similar dereliction can affect an outlet's screening of outside contributors, allowing authoritarian actors to disseminate propaganda through writers who conceal their financial ties and affiliations. Persian Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, for example, have been known to use lobbying firms and contractors to spread their messages in op-eds and other media content without the appropriate disclosures.<sup>11</sup>

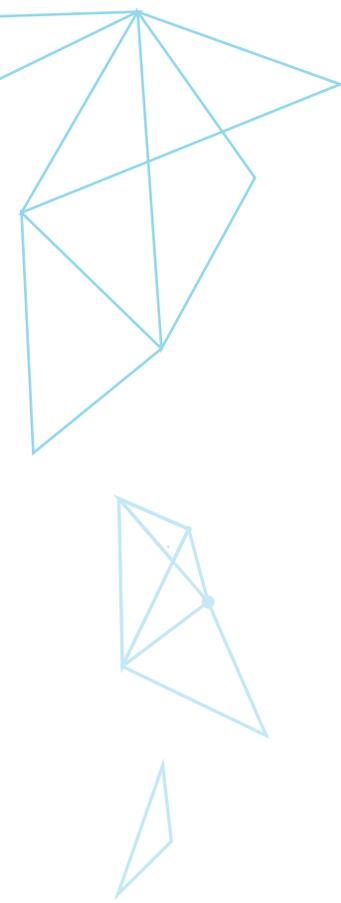
An associated vulnerability stems from decisions about what is news in the first place. News agendas are notoriously tricky to pin down. Topics go in and out of fashion, based on perceptions of what media consumers will find interesting. "Man bites dog" is news. "Dog bites man" is not. Human tragedies close to readers' own experience are more interesting than distant ones. Plane crashes matter more than automobile accidents. One life lost nearby is more newsworthy than a dozen elsewhere, or thousands on the other side of the world. Controversy, however meaningless, is typically more newsworthy than agreement. Human psychology, and editorial perceptions of it, create a natural drift toward sensationalist news. This is exacerbated by competition. If your rivals are chasing the most attention-grabbing news and you are not, you may lose out.

At the top end of the market, new outlets can build their brand by cultivating a measured, even aloof, approach to the news. The BBC World Service newsroom, where this author worked in the mid-1980s, built its reputation on broadcasting news only when it had at least two reputable sources. It was better to miss stories than to get them wrong. But in other segments of the news business, the reverse applies. It is better to be first than to be right. Memories are short, and appetites are strong.

A particular problem involves the reporting of perceived wrongdoing. Journalists have a strong, even overwhelming instinct to pursue stories that imply misconduct. The line between private hypocrisy, rudeness, and extravagance on the one hand and serious criminal or unethical behavior on the other is blurry, and can easily be blurred further. A clandestine recording of a public figure using obscene language, or saying unpleasant things about supposed friends and allies, is instantly newsworthy. How dare Politician X pretend in public to be cozy with Politician Y, and then say mean things about him in private?



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That approach is eminently open to abuse. The right to have a private conversation is a fundamental element of a free society. Even the most zealous advocate of transparency in public life does not argue that politicians should wear body cameras recording their every deed and word. Once you accept that public figures have the right to private behavior, you should then accept that this will on occasion differ from what they say and do in public. The difference—call it privacy arbitrage—becomes newsworthy only when it is genuinely scandalous, calling into question the politician's fitness for office. Potentially criminal or treasonous behavior, for example, would qualify.

This was illustrated by the *aféra taśmowa*, or tape scandal, in Poland in 2014.<sup>12</sup> Government ministers were clandestinely recorded in Warsaw restaurants. In one case, two were eating an expensive meal (featuring octopus) at taxpayers' expense and bad-mouthing other members of the government, as well as the administration of then US president Barack Obama. The media—rightly, in a narrow commercial sense—published the recordings, which appalled the Polish public. One of the parties to the “octopus” conversation, then foreign minister Radosław (Radek) Sikorski, was moved to another position and suffered substantial damage to his political career. It could be argued that some wrongdoing, namely lavish spending and ugly, hypocritical language, was exposed. But the Polish media skated over the difficult aspects of the story. Are ministers allowed to meet and talk privately? Are they allowed to use swear words in private? If they are to live in a digital panopticon, when was this decided, by whom, and with what exceptions, punishments, and other rules?

The media largely missed the most important questions pertaining to material that reaches journalists through unorthodox means. Is it genuine? Is the inference placed on it correct? What were the motives of those who obtained and provided it? Were the means used legal? If they involved trickery or even lawbreaking, is that proportionate to the purported wrongdoing exposed? Grzegorz Rzeczkowski, an investigative reporter for the weekly magazine *Polityka*, has described the restaurant's owner, Marek Falenta, as a Russian intelligence asset. Rzeczkowski said he had found evidence of links between Falenta and Poland's populist conservative party (then in opposition), as well as links between Falenta and Russians that go beyond a publicly known business connection involving coal imports.<sup>13</sup> This seems far more scandalous than the content of the recordings, and raises the possibility that the Polish media were manipulated into serving the political interests of an authoritarian power.

It is notable that this sort of story has played out in similar ways again and again. The most notorious case may have been the Russian leaks of hacked Democratic Party emails during the 2016 US presidential election,<sup>14</sup> but other actors have also used the bait of enticing leaks to instrumentalize mass media in democracies. Figures on both sides of the diplomatic rift between Qatar and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council have been targeted in such leaks since 2017, including a prominent American lobbyist and the Emirati ambassador to the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Another instructive example of inadequate journalistic rigor concerns the destruction of a Malaysian airliner, MH17, by Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The perpetrators' culpability was fairly clear at the time, and has since been proved beyond all reasonable doubt by the open-source investigators at Bellingcat.<sup>16</sup> These conclusions have been endorsed by prosecutors in the Netherlands, where the flight originated.<sup>17</sup> But Russian state-controlled media and their allies in Western Europe continue to insist that the story is not so simple. They focus on minor details in the evidence and possible failures of procedure by the investigating authorities to cast doubt on the obvious version of events. No single alternative explanation is adduced. Instead, the Russian side produces a blizzard of possible scenarios ranging from the superficially plausible to the outlandish. One proposes that the Ukrainians shot down the plane by mistake and are covering it up with help from Western intelligence services.<sup>18</sup>

The responsible reaction to this behavior would be to treat it like flat-earthism—as a phenomenon rather than as a theory in viable competition with the truth. It is interesting that the Kremlin is putting forward these stories. But the stories are not themselves interesting. Adopting this approach would require journalists and editors to consciously set aside their natural instincts toward fair-mindedness and take on the more difficult but more valuable task of distinguishing what is true and important from what is merely noteworthy nonsense.

## RUSSIA'S STRATEGY FOR MEDIA INFLUENCE

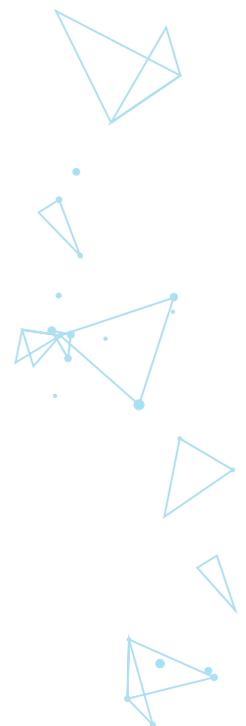
To appreciate the danger posed by the vulnerabilities described above, one must understand that propaganda efforts like those surrounding the MH17 disaster are not isolated Russian responses to particular events. They are manifestations of a comprehensive “sharp power” strategy aimed at disrupting, subverting, and essentially hijacking the information systems of targeted countries and regions. The Kremlin's ambitions are evident in the scale of its financial investments and the global reach of its activities.

There are three main parts to Russian sharp power strategy in the media sphere. The first is to reach media consumers through the Kremlin's own state media outlets. The state-owned newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* produces a paid supplement, *Russia Beyond*, which is inserted into local papers in some 27 countries using 16 languages.<sup>19</sup> The external television broadcaster RT and the *soi-disant* news agency and external radio broadcaster Sputnik are even more widely available, producing content in dozens of languages. When their material is accessed directly from the source, the ownership and the agenda of these outlets are concealed scarcely, if at all. The selling point is “balance.” You have heard what the mainstream media have to say. Now here's another view. If you pride yourself on your open-mindedness, should you not at least try to understand the Kremlin's point of view? Do you really trust your own media to tell you the truth? This approach is epitomized by the RT motto “Question More.”

The second part of the Russian media strategy is to use financial and other means to influence mainstream media in target countries. Sputnik content, for example, is free to use, whereas Reuters and other international news agencies charge client outlets for their services. Much of Sputnik's reporting is not overtly political, and includes otherwise-expensive categories such as foreign news. It is, therefore, tempting for cash-strapped media outlets in poor countries, like those of the Western Balkans, to rely on Sputnik to fill pages and airtime. In this case, the media consumer, and indeed the editors and reporters involved in repackaging and disseminating Sputnik content, may have little idea that they are dealing with material produced by a Kremlin-financed propaganda outlet. What they notice is that it is free and interesting.

Along with these carrots come sticks. If a foreign outlet offends the Kremlin, it risks punishment. The lucrative paid supplements may be withdrawn. Outlets that report critically about Moscow's activities may face libel actions or cyberattacks.

The third part of the strategy is clandestine or indirect pressure. This can take the form of secret financing of competitors, disguised mergers and acquisitions, and the bribery of key staff. Or it can involve news outlets that have no overt connection with Russia. Examples of these include Baltnews in the Baltic states,<sup>20</sup> or the infamous DCLeaks and USAPoliticsToday sites, which published the material stolen from the Democratic Party and the Hillary Clinton campaign computers in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election.<sup>21</sup> Clandestine pressure tactics also include the direct provision to mainstream media of material obtained through intelligence operations, as in Poland's *aféra taśmowa*, cited above. Though these methods should trigger journalistic alarm bells, all too often they do not.



## CHINA'S STRATEGY FOR MEDIA INFLUENCE

China, the other major player in global sharp power influence activities, employs many of the same media strategies, but with some differences. For example, in addition to paid newspaper supplements by state-run *China Daily* and free news content from the official news agency Xinhua, the external broadcaster China Global Television Network (CGTN) engages in coproductions with mainstream outlets in target countries, which then air the resulting programs to their own viewers.<sup>22</sup> As with Russia, the state affiliation and political agendas of Chinese media outlets and content are often veiled in various ways to avoid raising the suspicions of foreign news consumers.

In terms of carrots and sticks, Beijing uses the non-media business interests of media owners as economic leverage. If a US media giant hopes to distribute its entertainment programming in China, or a Taiwanese conglomerate wishes to maintain its snack food empire on the mainland, they will learn to avoid offending Beijing through the reporting of their news media assets. Some pressure and outright threats are conveyed directly—particularly via Chinese diplomats abroad and state security agents within China. Disfavored media and critical journalists face visa denials, blocked websites, and harassment or even detention of family members in China. Outside the country, not only are advertisers warned to avoid certain outlets, but foreign institutions and government agencies are enlisted to bar critical outlets' access to newsworthy venues or launch prosecutions of key staff.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, many positive incentives draw journalists and media owners into Beijing's fold: the prestige of being allied with or linked to a major power; the opportunity to be wined and dined on an international junket, conference, or "training" event hosted by China; or the prospect of Chinese state media sharing a foreign news outlet's content with their much larger audiences (although it is unclear how often that actually happens). Like Russia's state media, official Chinese outlets encourage collaboration by framing it as a way to challenge Western media dominance and provide an alternative perspective on global events. This does not necessarily mean casting doubt on rival outlets' reporting. Rather, foreign media are urged to partner with China to better reflect the views of the developing world, or the global South.<sup>24</sup>

**The Chinese government and favored private companies, which have access to vastly greater resources than their Russian counterparts, are making a major effort to gain influence and control over key content dissemination platforms and infrastructure.**

Lastly, the Chinese government and favored private companies, which have access to vastly greater resources than their Russian counterparts, are making a major effort to gain influence and control over key content dissemination platforms and infrastructure, enabling them to become the "gatekeepers" of news and information in other countries. The coopted entities can then favor Beijing's narratives and outlets in their business decisions and content moderation policies, while downplaying or censoring independent competitors, criticism of human rights abuses, or support for perceived enemies of the Chinese regime, such as Hong Kong's prodemocracy protesters. This is already beginning to play out in the digital television sector in several African countries and on social media platforms like the Tencent-owned WeChat and ByteDance's TikTok.<sup>25</sup>

While Russia's efforts to expand its international media influence and weaken its geopolitical adversaries are certainly ambitious, China's sprawling activities amount to a bid for outright dominance of the world's information systems.<sup>26</sup> Together, and combined with similar engagement by lesser authoritarian powers in the Middle East and elsewhere, they present a formidable challenge to the survival of press freedom and freedom of expression in democracies.

## RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

An effective response to authoritarian media influence requires an array of normative, legal, and practical changes.

**Norm building** is a common feature of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to pursue the public good in democratic societies. We encourage drivers to behave safely on the road, not just within the constraints of the criminal law, but in accordance with conventions about polite human interaction. The same applies to public health. There is no law requiring customers to wash their hands after using the restroom, even if it may be a legal requirement for staff handling food. But we put signs up to encourage all people to do it. We need to apply such norm building to the information space. Don't spread rumors; malicious gossip can hurt. "Revenge porn," or nonconsensual pornography, may be legal in some jurisdictions, but it is despicable everywhere. The norms should apply to both consumers and producers of information. This does not point toward any kind of statutory licensing system for journalists; this was part of the Soviet agenda during the UNESCO discussions on a so-called New World Information Order.<sup>27</sup> But that does not exclude journalists from discussing ethics or creating norms-based systems to develop them, monitor breaches, and apply social sanctions—such as ostracism—to culprits. Other professions self-regulate in part without statutory backing. Journalists can do the same.

A blueprint for action on norm building is overdue. The first step should be the creation of a **charter of responsible practice** with input from professional associations and trade unions, journalism schools, and industry bodies. Diversity of opinion would be accepted and welcome. But media outlets that sign up to the charter should commit to the following:

- Transparency of ownership and commercial relationships
- Clear and visible acknowledgment of franchising, sponsorship, and "advertorial" deals
- Publication of "real-world" location and contact details
- Naming of editors-in-chief and other senior staff
- Public display of editorial policy regarding the use of anonymous sourcing
- Provision of means for the public to complain about inaccuracies or distortions, development of a procedure for dealing with these complaints, and the issuance of print apologies, clarifications, and corrections where appropriate

It should be noted that none of these requirements constrain editorial freedom. A media outlet that adopts this charter could have a highly partisan editorial stance, but would still distinguish itself from willful and clandestine purveyors of disinformation and rumor.

A related norm building effort involves **discretion in interactions** with problematic media. Not every media outlet is equally important: we already discriminate between requests from major and minor media, because our time is limited. Similarly, not every outlet is equally worth cooperating with on ethical and national security grounds. A great advantage for state-owned propaganda outlets such as RT and CGTN is their ability to exploit the egos of public figures, authors, academics, and others who like the idea of appearing on television. We cannot ban people from appearing on these channels, but we can increase the social cost. Publishers could discourage their authors from accepting invitations. Universities could issue guidance through their press offices to faculty and students. Public bodies could decline to provide quotes. Starved of reputable contributors, these outlets' dependence on cranks, ax-grinders, and propagandists would become embarrassing—and damaging.

In the long term, **media literacy education** offers the best hope of improving the “immune system” of democratic media environments. Children and young people are often less naïve about online information than their elders; educating them about how to assess the veracity and origins of news is easier. Curricular development in rich countries offers plenty of scope for cross-fertilization. Finnish media literacy projects, for instance, are already attracting attention.<sup>28</sup> In poor countries with less-developed education systems, media literacy needs to be part of development policy.

**A major issue is media resilience in the face of intimidation, which similarly requires a combined statutory, normative, and civil society effort. The aim is to make authoritarian pressure tactics so ineffective that they are no longer used.**

**Statutory regulation** has its place too. One clear area for improvement is transparency of ownership, including state affiliation. Access to terrestrial broadcast frequencies should be dependent not only on ability to pay, but also on clarity of beneficial ownership. Separately, we should encourage the numerous private sector and nongovernmental initiatives that are developing systems for ranking and signaling in online news. Does this site have a street address? Does it have a phone number? Does it publish corrections and apologies? Does it carry dissenting viewpoints? Do its journalists have professional backgrounds? Has its coverage ever won a journalistic prize? All these questions, and others, provide the grounds for scoring a news site in terms of its credibility and integrity. A site that does poorly should not be banned, but we should find ways of letting visitors know what kind of online neighborhood they are entering.

The next major issue is media resilience in the face of intimidation, which similarly requires a combined statutory, normative, and civil society effort. The aim is to make authoritarian pressure tactics so ineffective that they are no longer used.

The first part of this is building resilience at an institutional level, chiefly by increasing **cooperative behavior in response to threats**. To be clear, news outlets should compete. Competition rewards excellence, punishes failure, and raises standards. But a purely competitive approach to the information system has grave weaknesses. It allows malign actors to play divide-and-rule, tempting individuals and institutions with commercial or professional advantage. Journalists and editors already display some solidarity in response to threats, through trade unions, editors' associations, press clubs, and media ethics programs. The proposals outlined above could play a role in strengthening cohesion.

But for maximum resilience, we need to add a specific threat-related dimension. We need to engage in strategic thinking about the allocation of resources, research, or outreach; to investigate our adversaries' approach and tactics; and to work out how to forestall their efforts. The scope for improvement is clear. Imagine, for example, if news outlets pooled their efforts to bring in heavyweight legal support for investigative journalism. A hostile oligarch or autocrat would think twice before trying to intimidate a small media organization if he knew it could call on a multimillion-dollar legal defense fund. Another form of collective action would involve editors agreeing not to accept advertorials from hostile state actors, or to ostracize those outlets that do. Information technology departments could collaborate to strengthen the cybersecurity of newsrooms, reporters, and sources, perhaps even agreeing to host other outlets' content if they suffer a distributed denial-of-service attack. Media organizations could also cooperate on training programs, particularly for editorial staff tasked with responding to pressure from embassies or the threat of visa bans. The best response to targeted intimidation by, say, the Chinese authorities might be collective action—a warning that no Beijing-based correspondent will attend a press conference unless all accredited foreign journalists are allowed to attend it.

A second component of this cooperative behavior is **support for individual journalists**. The case of Jessikka Aro, the Finnish journalist who in 2016 helped uncover Russia's online "troll factory" in St. Petersburg, is illustrative here. She was the subject of targeted, state-sponsored harassment, ranging from the unearthing of irrelevant but embarrassing personal information to vindictive pranks, such as sending a spoofed text message purporting to be from her deceased father. The Finnish system let her down, and she had to live abroad in an undisclosed location.<sup>29</sup>

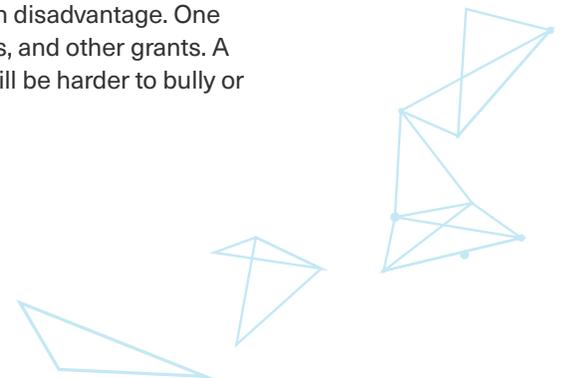
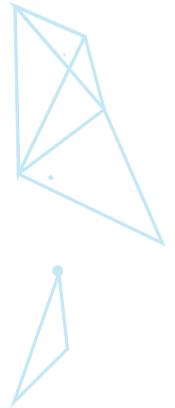
Since then, Finnish officials, editors, and other figures involved in the media system have drawn conclusions and set up a Media Pool organization that aims to provide journalists, activists, and other victims of state-sponsored harassment with support and redress.<sup>30</sup> Some aspects of this are private, others public.

Ideally such a system, applied more broadly, would include the following:

- A hotline offering the victim of harassment a single point of high-level contact
- Speedy intervention by the criminal justice system
- The attention of counterintelligence authorities
- Diplomatic protest to the culprit country
- Liaison with other countries whose nationals may be involved in the harassment
- Psychological and other support
- Assistance with legal fees
- Physical security at home and at work (panic buttons, security cameras)
- Cooperation of other media, for example in boycotting leaked personal material

When the components of support are listed like this, the need for it becomes clear. At the moment, a journalist (or activist, think-tank researcher, academic, or author) who is targeted by Russia or China is largely dependent on his or her employer, if there is one. This employer may or may not be supportive, or may even themselves be coerced or encouraged not to get involved. The police are not equipped to understand the political significance of what may appear to them to be harassment that falls short of criminal behavior. Counterintelligence and security agencies typically reserve their efforts for the protection of state employees. Governments may be unwilling to sour trade or diplomatic relations on behalf of an individual. There is, therefore, a need to quickly assess the merits of the case—is the victim indeed suffering real harassment because of genuine journalistic or similar activity? If so, a plan should exist to support them. Such efforts should not be improvised; they should be rehearsed and developed with high-level bureaucratic and budgetary backing.

The biggest and most difficult vulnerability, of course, is the economic weakness of the mainstream media, coupled with the political polarization mentioned above. No easy solution to this exists. State subsidies to the media come with political strings. Some forms of philanthropic support can encourage editors to pander to their donors, rather than to serve the public, and it places the outlets that try to make a living on purely commercial grounds at a certain disadvantage. One solution may be to subsidize individual journalists through prizes, fellowships, and other grants. A reporter who knows that his or her income is secure for the next five years will be harder to bully or bribe than one who worries about how to feed the family.



## THE COSTS OF COMPLACENCY

No single or simple solution will blunt the impact of sharp power on the information systems of our democracies. But remedies, prophylactic measures, and deterrents are all available. The problem is not one of principle, or of means, but of will. We need to accept that in a world where hostile state actors have great market power and no accountability, free speech is too important to be left to the free market. If we allow commercial pressure alone to dictate the information flows in our societies, we are in effect selling political decision making to the highest bidder.

This does not mean it is necessary to adopt the top-down controls that characterize our adversaries' information systems. We do not want governments or intelligence agencies deciding what information is "safe" and what is "unsafe." It would be a perverse outcome if we responded to the threat of Putinism by "Putinizing" our own societies.

But distaste for state intervention in the media is no excuse for apathy or complacency. We need to create a commercial environment in which authentic, responsible media outlets can compete and thrive, and not be drowned out by propagandists. Media practitioners need to rethink deeply held ideas about competition, openness, fair-mindedness, and prudence. Taken to extremes, these are weaknesses, not strengths. Seen from the perspective of high-end media in rich, big countries with strong institutions, these problems can look less daunting. For this reason, remedial efforts should place a particular emphasis on the media in small-language and poor countries, and in the non-elite segments of the media landscape.

We need to accept the bleak truth that we are losing the battle of ideas with authoritarian regimes, not because our ideas are weak, but because the battlefield is skewed against them. If we fail to rise to this challenge, our information systems will cease to be a bulwark against hostile sharp power, and will instead become a vector for its transmission. Our other public institutions—courts, criminal justice systems, elected officials, the civil service, and the armed forces—and ultimately democracy and freedom themselves will be gravely, and eventually fatally, weakened if the information system falls into the hands of our adversaries.

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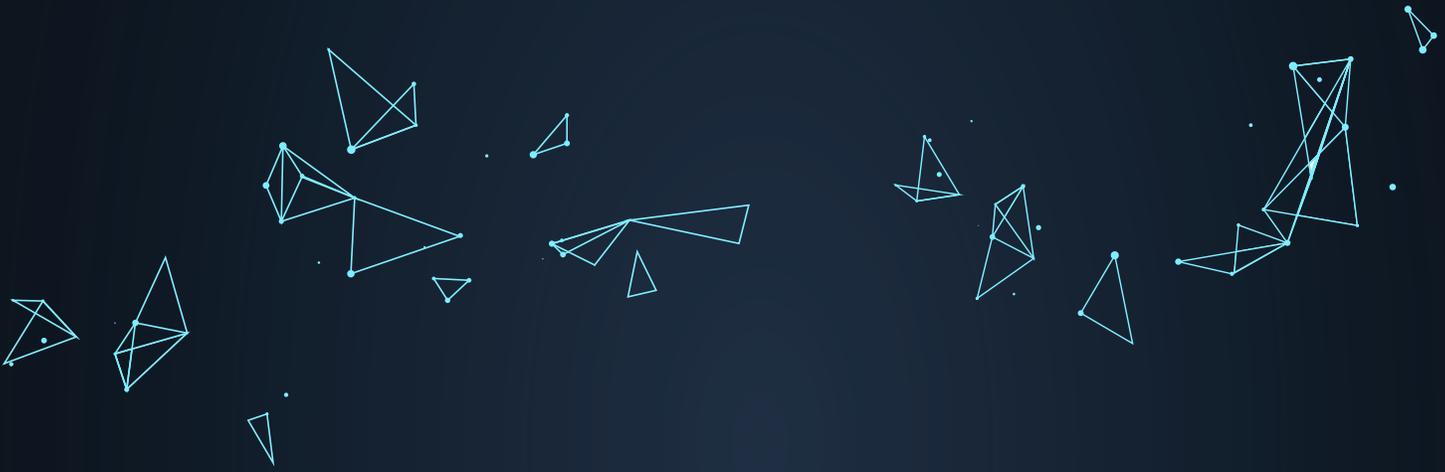
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