

Authoritarian Disinformation

A COVID Test for Latin America's Information Space

By Vladimir Rouvinski



When a Spanish-speaking Latin American television consumer wants to see news from trusted North American or European media, they are likely to look to several television channels, for example, CNN en Español. However, the channels that were in the recent past a familiar source of news for viewers in this part of the world today have greatly reduced the amount of live broadcasting they provide. Instead, they often repeat programs recorded a day or even several days before. In many cases, these programs are not even about politics, but about music, culture, and consumer goods. The overall quality of the programs offered by trusted sources remains high, but they are leaving an important part of the information space—international news—empty.

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In the past several years, government-sponsored media from Russia, China, and Iran have rushed to take advantage of this abandoned space. Because of the generous support they receive from state budgets, these outlets are able to offer extensive coverage of political events in spite of the high production costs that limit trusted independent media. They are rapidly becoming key sources of information on international developments for Latin American audiences.¹ Moreover, programs originally made by Russia, China, and Iran are often broadcast by other channels and appear on social media, where news consumers are not always aware that they have been exposed to biased interpretations of events.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the investments that Russia, China, Iran, and some other authoritarian governments made in Latin America's media space bore fruit. Taking advantage of a great deal of uncertainty and confusion in Latin America and the Caribbean, these authoritarian-sponsored media outlets began disseminating propaganda about the pandemic, a global crisis which had a severe impact on national and global economies. For these authoritarian governments, the new coronavirus presented them with a two-fold opportunity to define their strategies in the information space of the Western Hemisphere.

On the one hand, Russia, China, and Iran's narratives downplay the efforts of other governments to provide relief to the population and effectively manage the risks associated with COVID-19. For example, since the global pandemic began, RT en Español—the Spanish-language branch of RT, Russia's state-controlled international television network—has aired numerous programs showing how the United States and Europe have failed to meet the challenges caused by the virus.² Although many (but not all) of the facts reported by RT were accurate, their interpretation can be rightly called disinformation: the Moscow-funded media outlet provided viewers with partial context, and only opinions from a carefully pre-selected segment of the expert community and common people were featured. Chinese and Iranian

media coverage of Western democracies' pandemic response demonstrates similar strategic disinformation. From this perspective, it is evident that these authoritarian countries' media platforms have used the health crisis to reinforce their already familiar anti-American, anti-Western discourse.

The spread of the virus started with little early warning and required a swift response by governments around the world, including from developed democracies. However, the central pillar of the narrative promoted in Latin America and the Caribbean by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian state-sponsored media is the idea that illiberal governments are better fit to meet the challenges of the pandemic than liberal democracies.

Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran have been pushing three key messages about the worldwide response to the new coronavirus. The first message is about the presumed effectiveness of the measures taken by authoritarian governments to control the movements of people while providing adequate testing and treatment. The second emphasizes unequal provision of assistance to different strata of the population in democratic countries, in contrast with universal coverage provided by illiberal governments. The final and perhaps most important idea is that Western governments are failing to meet their obligations as leaders of the established liberal world order while resisting the attempts by other actors like Russia and China to fill the gap.

Over the course of the pandemic, "COVID diplomacy" and the vaccine race have emerged as key elements of Russia and China's expanded disinformation operations in Latin America. The first refers to the Russian and Chinese governments' donations of face masks and high-tech medical equipment to several countries in the region. Despite the relatively small (in practical terms) size of the donations, state media outlets in both Moscow and Beijing provided wide coverage of public events where the donations were presented to Latin American nations.³ Even though the United States and many other Western nations have also been making donations linked to the pandemic, these gestures have not received similar attention in regional media. Consequently, the Latin American audience may easily receive the impression that Russia and China are the only nations that care about them.

In the case of the vaccine race, the Russian government's messaging in Latin America's media space has been aggressive. Moscow has essentially mandated to its health and international agencies that Russia will be the first nation to produce a vaccine, despite international concern over its safety protocols. It presents the Russian government health agency's premature approval of the "Sputnik V" vaccine (before it completed clinical trials) as evidence that Russia is one of the most technologically advanced nations—and implies that poor coverage of its achievements in Western mass media has denied Russian science the status it deserves.⁴ In addition, Russian media alleges that pro-Western Latin American governments are not willing to acquire the Russian vaccine because of their political ties with Washington, rather than because the proposed vaccine has not yet undergone all the necessary tests and safety procedures.⁵ This strategy has already contributed to noticeable tensions between local and national political actors in the region.⁶ There is little doubt that

Moscow will continue to exploit a topic as politically sensitive as COVID-19 vaccines, using media manipulation as one of its tools for sowing discord and confusion.

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Despite the advances made by authoritarian media in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are plenty of opportunities to offer Latin Americans high-quality information from trusted sources. One way to do so is to encourage local media to collaborate more closely with U.S. and European media outlets. Based on the interviews conducted by this author with a number of Latin American journalists, they are aware of the nature of Russian, Chinese, and Iranian interest in the region. However, they believe the best solution would not be to prohibit authoritarian media, but instead to promote alternative democratic narratives. Support for fact-checking efforts on social networks has become sounder in recent months, and is also helpful. Other stakeholders like universities and locally based think tanks, which are more familiar with the local context than research institutions outside of Latin America, might also carry out research projects allowing scholars and experts to identify the particular characteristics of Russian, Chinese, and Iranian engagement of the Latin American information space and draw appropriate policy recommendations.

What ties all of these responses together is a renewed commitment to the space for news and information, left vacant by retreating independent media, and now contested by authoritarian powers from outside the region. Reinvestment in this space is critical to the future health of Latin American democracy.

Endnotes

- 1 It is difficult to estimate the exact audience numbers for Russian, Chinese, and Iranian government-sponsored media in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, it is evident that Russia's media outlets (RT en Español, Sputnik Mundo) in particular have managed to acquire wide audiences everywhere in Latin America. More than 350 different cable television providers (based on the author's own data) have been offering RT in Spanish to its subscribers as part of the basic package and, as of November 2020, RT's Spanish-language YouTube channel has 4.2 million subscribers.
- 2 See, for example, "Los motivos por los que la vacuna contra el coronavirus puede fracasar en EE.UU.," RT en Español, 9 July 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/359368-medica-asegurar-vacuna-coronavirus-fracasar-eeuu>; "EE.UU.: La crisis generada por la pandemia castiga más a las comunidades latina y afroamericana," RT en Español, 4 August 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/video/362149-eeuu-crisis-generada-pandemia-comunidades>; "Analista: 'La pandemia del covid-19 demostró que la alianza entre EE.UU. y la UE no vale nada'," RT en Español, 30 June 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/video/358317-pandemia-covid19-alianza-eeuu-ue>; Luis Gonzalo Seguro, "Europa, a diferencia de China, fracasa en el control del coronavirus," RT en Español, 24 March 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/opinion/luis-gonzalo-seguro/347383-europa-fracaso-china-exito-control-coronavirus>; "EE.UU. desperdicia 'el tiempo valioso que China ha ganado!': Pekín arremete contra Washington por su retórica 'racista' del coronavirus!," RT en Español, 21 March 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/347038-china-arremeter-eeuu-retorica-racista-coronavirus>.
- 3 According to the U.S. State Department, the United States provided more than \$73 million in medical supplies and capacity building support to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in Central and South American countries—including more than \$12 million to Venezuela. (See: "U.S. sends coronavirus aid to Central and South America," Bureau of Global Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 8 May 2020, <https://share.america.gov/u-s-sends-coronavirus-aid-to-central-and-south-america>.) However, few Latin Americans are aware of these efforts since the U.S. aid did not receive sufficient coverage by mass media in the region. On the contrary, when China sent just a single plane with medical supplies to Venezuela, the arrival of aid was widely covered by many TV channels throughout Latin America. See: "Venezuela recibe ayuda de China para luchar contra el COVID-19," TeleSur TV, 28 March 2020, <https://youtu.be/ad4k7BtdHjk>; "Venezuela recibe de China insumos médicos para hacer pruebas de Covid-19," France24 Español, 29 March 2020, <https://youtu.be/pWpVRBA3G3A>; "Venezuela recibe ayuda de China para combatir virus," Associated Press, 30 March 2020, https://youtu.be/9s_VwTuSGGQ. In the case of Russia, the delivery of small amounts of Russia's "Sputnik V" vaccine to Venezuela received extensive coverage by media in Latin America. See, for example, "Llega a Venezuela la vacuna rusa contra el covid-19 Sputnik V," RT en Español, 2 October 2020, <https://youtu.be/FWiy-VQwMHE>; "Venezuela recibe cargamento de vacunas de Rusia contra covid-19," AFP Español, 2 October 2020, <https://youtu.be/OesfPuDibmM>.
- 4 Isabelle Khurshudyan, "In Race for Coronavirus Vaccine, Russia Ramps Up Rhetoric to Defend Sputnik V," *Washington Post*, 4 October 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/coronavirus-vaccine-russia-sputnik/2020/10/03/83075a10-f380-11ea-8025-5d3489768ac8_story.html.
- 5 See, for example, "La carrera por la vacuna: ¿Cabe la política en medio de la pandemia?," RT en Español, 13 August 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/video/363090-experto-criticas-vacuna-rusa-eeuu>.
- 6 For instance, the governor of one of the provinces in Peru sent a letter directly to Vladimir Putin asking to supply the vaccine despite the fact that the decision to allow the Russian vaccine into the country is the exclusive prerogative of the President; see Elmer Cáceres, "Embajada de Rusia responde sobre pedido de vacuna contra el COVID-19," TVPERU, 20 August 2020, www.tvperu.gob.pe/noticias/nacionales/elmer-caceres-embajada-de-rusia-responde-sobre-pedido-de-vacuna-contra-el-covid-19. Another example is when the Russian ambassador, after a major Colombian newspaper asked him about the matter, blamed the Colombian government for not being willing to reach out to Moscow to get the vaccine; Luisa Mercado, "Colombia no está interesada en la vacuna rusa: embajador ruso," *El Tiempo*, 16 August 2020, www.eltiempo.com/politica/vacuna-colombia-no-esta-interesado-en-la-vacuna-rusa-segun-embajador-528984.