

Christopher Walker

Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Subcommittee on State Department and USAID Management, International Operations, and Bilateral International Development

“The Global Information Wars: Is the U.S. Winning or Losing?”

May 3, 2023

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee.

If there ever were a time for the United States and its democratic allies to make competition in information domain a top order, global priority, it would be now. This is because the contemporary information revolution touches nearly every aspect of life as we know it. And over a protracted period of time, authoritarian regimes – whose worldview is at direct odds with that of the democracies – have massively scaled up their capabilities to suppress unfavorable information and amplify distorted pro-regime messaging across the global information sphere.

Plainly said, we are in a fiercely competitive information environment, in which leading authoritarian powers, principally China and Russia, have mobilized in ways that are threatening the interests of the United States and its democratic partners – and more fundamentally undermining democratic principles and interests globally.

As my colleagues and I have written, although there are differences in the shape and tone of the Chinese and Russian approaches, both stem from a governance model that privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought.¹

A picture of these regimes’ intent can be gleaned from their own domestic media landscapes. It has long been standard operating procedure for Beijing and Moscow to suppress dissent, smear or silence political opponents, and inundate their populations with propagandistic content. The paramount power holders in these countries brook no pluralism or dissent. Authorities in China, Russia, Iran and other autocracies, systematically intimidate, harass, and imprison their own media professionals. In an era of rising impunity, these regimes, which possess unchecked and arbitrary power, are more inclined to impose such harsh measures on foreign journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported in December 2022 that the number of jailed journalists had reached a 30-year high, with 363 individuals behind bars, and named Iran, China, Myanmar, Turkey, and Belarus, as the top five offenders, respectively.² The *Washington Post’s* Jason Rezaian was imprisoned in Iran’s notorious Evin prison for 544 days. Russia’s detention of the *Wall Street Journal’s* Evan Gershkovic is the most recent, deeply disturbing case of this kind – and deserves particular attention, given that today is World Press Freedom Day.

¹ Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig (Eds.). (2017). *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*. International Forum for Democratic Studies. <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf>

² *Number of jailed journalists spikes to new global record*. (n.d.). Committee to Protect Journalists. <https://cpj.org/reports/2022/12/number-of-jailed-journalists-spikes-to-new-global-record/>

In the quest for information dominance, nowhere is the manipulation of media and ideas more embedded in the system than in China. Domestically, the Chinese authorities have built a formidable infrastructure of intrusive social management that increasingly relies on advanced technologies to surveil, coerce, and engineer societal behavior. This system incentivizes compliance with Communist party doctrine in daily life and punishes even minor forms of dissent or opposition. In the digital era, decision makers in China have constructed a powerful censorship architecture that is redefining the boundaries of information management and manipulation.

For China's governors such ambitions to dominate the information environment is a feature, not a bug, of the system. In one illustrative example of the studious authoritarian avoidance of sensitive domestic issues, China's state-run media did not report at all on the country's massive stock-market collapse in August 2015.³

In recent months, the authorities in Beijing have effectively obscured the deaths of some one million people who are believed to have perished due to the abrupt turnabout from the country's "zero covid" policy.⁴ The authorities in Beijing are rewriting the way "the pandemic is remembered in China by withholding data on its impact and censoring people who contradict the government line that its handling of the virus was a triumph."⁵

The real world impact of Beijing's controlling approach was felt internationally through its manipulation of the World Health Organization: the hobbled response of the world's leading public-health body at the outset of the covid pandemic was no doubt related to the PRC's furtive approach to the breakout of the virus, for which millions of people within and beyond China's borders have paid the highest price.⁶

This episode speaks to the situation in which we find ourselves today: in a globalized information environment, the media norms and behaviors of authoritarians do not stay confined within the borders of their own repressive systems. Let me take a moment to put into perspective the extent of the global mobilization undertaken by China and Russia in the realm of information and ideas.

The Authoritarian Global Media Mobilization

Over the past two decades, Beijing and Moscow along with like-minded regimes have developed a diverse constellation of efforts to shape perceptions and project their preferred worldview, while contesting the ideas they find intolerable.

Authoritarian regimes are engaged in what my colleagues William J. Dobson and Tarek Masoud describe as a "hidden war on democracy," given the extent to which autocrats have leveraged the democracies' open systems, including media and information, to their advantage.⁷ China and Russia in their own

³ Chris Buckley. (2015, August 25). *China's Party-Run Media Is Silent on Market Mayhem*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/asia/chinese-news-media-largely-silent-amid-stock-market-turmoil.html>

⁴ Michael Schuman. (2023, February 24). *Can a Million Chinese People Die and Nobody Know? How China Can Hide a Million COVID Deaths*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/02/china-million-covid-deaths-communist-party/673177/>

⁵ Wenxin Fan & Shen Lu. (2023, April 23). *China Seeks to Write Its Own History of Battle With Covid-19*. Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-seeks-to-write-its-own-history-of-battle-with-covid-19-1f6f8939>

⁶ Elizabeth C. Economy. (2022). *The World According to China*. Polity.

⁷ See *Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*, forthcoming July 2023 from the Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title/12791/defending-democracy-age-sharp-power>

malign ways are vibrant internationalists, and upped the competition in the global information arena at a time when the world's leading democratic states have tended to turn inward. This imbalance has played into the autocrats' hands and to their advantage.

Russia's propaganda machine reportedly puts more than \$300M annually into RT alone.⁸ One recent estimate places Moscow's outward-facing information-related investments at \$1.5 billion.⁹

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which functions as the Iranian regime's state propaganda agency, in 2022 saw its budget increase by 46 percent to approximately \$1.26 billion.¹⁰

China has spent tens of billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, and the development of media enterprises with global reach. Writing in the *Journal of Democracy* in 2015, China expert Anne-Marie Brady observed that: "The scale and range of China's current annual investment in foreign-propaganda activities is so great that it would be impossible to come up with an accurate total budget." Brady went on to say that "international reports have cited figures ranging from \$7 billion to \$10 billion, but these numbers include only the subsidies given to media targeted at non-Chinese foreigners."¹¹ In the ensuing period, there is little to suggest the decision makers in China have scaled back such media investments, on the contrary.

But the fact is we do not really know with any real confidence the exact amounts these regimes spend on outward-facing media and information activities due to the non-transparent and unaccountable nature of these authoritarian systems.

This is an especially critical point in the context of today's hearing. These authoritarian regimes operate with few if any institutional checks on their power and decision making; the media outlets that operate in service of these regimes also do so without accountable and transparent governance norms or structures. On the surface, these enterprises can appear to be like instruments of soft power. But China's state media outlets, such as CGTN, and the Russian state's RT are not the BBC or Deutsche Welle, which operate according to codes of conduct oriented toward freedom, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These entities that operate in democratic settings, similar to U.S. international broadcasters, are subject to institutional scrutiny and accountability mechanisms.

A public hearing of the sort we are having today would be unimaginable in the Russian Duma or in China's National People's Congress, both of which are rubber stamp bodies that play no meaningful oversight role.

⁸ Christopher Paul & Miriam Matthews. (2016). *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf

⁹ Aleksandra Michałowska-Kubś & Jakub Kubś. (2022). *Coining lies. Kremlin spends 1.5 Billion per year to spread disinformation and propaganda*. Debunk.org. <https://www.debunk.org/coining-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda>

¹⁰ Ali Fathollah-Nejad, & Mahdi Ghodsi. (2022). *Raisi's shrinking budget cements the Islamic Republic's "trinity"*. Middle East Institute. <https://mei.edu/publications/raisi-shrinking-budget-cements-islamic-republics-trinity>

¹¹ Anne-Marie Brady. (2015). Authoritarianism Goes Global: China's Foreign Propaganda Machine. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(4), 51–59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0056>

In autocracies, because editorial accountability for state media outlets ultimately rests with political leadership with unchecked power, the content that they produce is systematically compromised, through either editorial omission or commission. RT, for instance, slavishly follows the Kremlin line, rationalizing the status quo that the regime seeks to maintain by cynically portraying all systems, whether autocratic or democratic, as corrupt.¹²

Russian authorities have long prioritized the development of an elaborate apparatus for the dissemination of Kremlin-friendly narratives around the globe. Over the past year, this outward-facing communications machinery's chief aim has been "to deflect attention from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, blame Kyiv or NATO countries for the conflict, and dampen support for Ukraine's cause." The Russian government's investments in the information sphere have yielded significant results in regions such as Latin America and Africa where the Kremlin's jaundiced messaging may go unchallenged. In Latin America, for example, the Russian government has continued to intensify its manipulation of public opinion through the use of friendly local influencers on Facebook and Twitter.¹³

Authoritarian powers take information seriously and democracies should as well. The autocrats invest in international media because they appreciate that these are the arenas in which ideas take hold and today's political battles are fought and won.

As part of its efforts to shape public opinion and serve the ideological aims of the CCP across the globe, the Chinese authorities are "training foreign journalists, buying space in overseas media, and expanding its state-owned networks on an unprecedented scale."¹⁴ For example, with respect to Beijing's evolving global media approach China expert Sarah Cook describes how China has "developed a wide-ranging toolkit that can distort democratic media environments through propaganda, censorship, disinformation, and control over content delivery systems." Media partnerships between Xinhua or CGTN and both public and private media outlets around the world have yielded content-sharing and coproduction agreements that insinuate Beijing-friendly content seamlessly into local media outlets. As Cook observes, "Most news consumers in these countries are unlikely to note Xinhua's presence in the byline of an article, and even if they do, they may not be aware of the agency's subservience to the CCP."¹⁵

While the autocrats take information and ideas seriously, they are not engaged in a form of communications and public diplomacy as democracies would understand it. Instead, they often are pursuing more malign objectives that associated with new forms of outwardly directed censorship and information manipulation, which my colleagues and I have described as "sharp power."

¹² Christopher Walker. (2016). The Authoritarian Threat: The Hijacking of "Soft Power." *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0007>

¹³ Adam Fivenson, Galyna Petrenko, Veronika Víchová, & Andrej Poleščuk. (2023). *Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*. International Forum for Democratic Studies. https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_Forum-Shielding-Democracy.pdf

¹⁴ Sean Mantesso & Christina Zhou. (2019). *China's multi-billion dollar media campaign "a major threat for democracies" around the world*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-08/chinas-foreign-media-push-a-major-threat-to-democracies/10733068>

¹⁵ Sarah Cook (2022). Countering Beijing's Media Manipulation. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(1), 116–130. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0008>

Meeting the Competition

In recent years, the proliferation of digital media globally has been one of the key drivers of deep, structural changes within the news industry, hobbling the production of fact-based news and leading to fragmentation and polarization. We need to acknowledge that the leading authoritarian powers have seized asymmetric advantages afforded to them by the modern media and information environment. Too often, observers in democracies have been complacent about the authoritarians' designs and ambitions.

As NED President and CEO Damon Wilson recently observed (March 28, 2023) to this full committee, "with Russia and China at the vanguard, authoritarian powers have grown increasingly more assertive and ambitious... and in an era of global interconnectivity, [these autocrats] recognize that keeping their own citizens in check is no longer enough to cement their power, and so they're partnering with other like-minded autocracies to share ideas, resources, and technologies."

In this new media and information environment, authoritarian regimes have exploited trends to muddy the information space, create societal cleavages, and obscure their own actions. This manipulation of the media ecosystem can have the effect of corroding the environment for democracy by marginalizing civil society voices, weakening democratic norms around reasoned and civil debate, and amplifying local voices who exploit divisive narratives for their own ends. Ultimately, authoritarian information strategies seek to undermine trust in democratic institutions and ideas.

This large and complex challenge posed by authoritarian regimes in the modern information environment requires a response on multiple fronts.

For its part, the National Endowment for Democracy supports rigorous independent journalism internationally to provide citizens with pluralistic and fact-based information, as well as the dissemination and adoption of widely-accepted standards of journalistic practices and integrity. In 2022, NED made \$51 million in grants to organizations working to protect democracy by strengthening independent media and freedom of information in some of the world's most repressive environments. NED grantees use a wide-range of approaches to address these challenges, including monitoring and documenting the actors and strategies behind information manipulation campaigns; leveraging research and analysis by contributing critical insights to policy discussions; and developing ways to mitigate the impact of authoritarian information manipulation through awareness-raising and public education initiatives that aim to build media literacy, proactively refuting harmful narratives spread through campaigns supported by China, Russia, and other such regimes.

NED supports cross-regional collaboration to compare research findings and discern patterns and trends in different parts of the world that have resulted in a shared understanding of threats emerging in the information environment. This is particularly important for democracy activists who are concerned about the role that foreign authoritarian disinformation campaigns play in their societies, where autocrats take advantage of weaknesses in the social fabric to undermine trust in democratic institutions.

NED has prioritized fighting for freedom of expression and media freedom for years, providing support for independent media and those who fight for a legal environment that enables the full enjoyment of freedom of expression. This remains one of the most important contributions to a healthy information space globally.

But there is a good deal more that needs to be done, given the scale of the authoritarians' media activities. According to an analysis by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at NED, just 0.3 percent of official U.S. development assistance is dedicated to independent media. The U.S. can encourage its partners at the OECD to spend more on democracy support, including for the media sector. Furthermore, members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) could be encouraged to adopt a common set of principles to ensure that existing support to information ecosystems is guided by best practices and up-to-date knowledge on effectiveness. A draft of such principles is currently being developed by DAC members with input from CIMA, the Global Forum for Media Development, and other civil society partners.

In this highly competitive and evolving context, the fact that U.S. international broadcasters – and public service-oriented international media entities in like-minded democracies – are doing their work according to a fundamentally different set of values is as important today as at any time since the end of the Cold War. As part of a multifaceted response to today's global information wars, U.S. international broadcasters have an especially crucial role to play, including systematically providing accurate and uncensored news in the growing number of settings where a free media is hobbled or at risk, including top order cases such as China, Russia, and Iran.

Given the standards being projected by the authoritarians in the global media context, it is all the more reason for the U.S. and other democracies to take a leadership role in modeling journalistic practices and standards that are grounded in trust, transparency, accountability, and integrity. This model stands in contrast to that of authoritarian regimes, which have built out massive outward-facing global strategic communications capabilities. To achieve greater leverage and surge capacity, these regimes increasingly align their anti-democratic narratives with each other. These narratives include a library of old lies that are often repeated and must be rebuffed again and again.

Meanwhile, international broadcasters, local independent media and NGOs are often doing the work of countering this media manipulation in isolation; those of us committed to democracy must identify ways to implement new forms of cooperation if we are to retake the initiative and counter the combined efforts of well-resourced authoritarians.

Finally, we cannot afford to suffer a failure of imagination. The threats to democratic development and security that arise from today's competitive global information environment requires a shift in strategic thinking among the democracies, which too often have taken a sluggish approach to competing in the modern information environment. Democracies should seize the challenge posed by autocrats as an opportunity to level up our investments in free media and democratic innovation, so that we are not perpetually playing catch up with mal-intentioned authoritarians.

Thank you for your time and attention.