BREAKING THE NEWS: THE ROLE OF STATE-RUN MEDIA

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Despite the rise of new media, and of media environments that generally are far more diverse and competitive than they used to be, authoritarian regimes are finding surprising (and alarmingly effective) ways to use media to help themselves stay in power. Media outlets controlled formally or informally by the state have become necessary to the durability of undemocratic governments around the world. The messages that such media pump out—and the public apathy that they promote—help to keep crucial regime elites from defecting and prevent alternative power centers from rising within society.

The media outlets in question may be owned and run by the state, or they may be nominally private but in fact under government control. Most authoritarian regimes—including those in China and Russia, the cutting-edge users of this model—employ both their own state media and private media to do their bidding.

The mention of Beijing and Moscow might give the impression that state-controlled media are a communist or postcommunist phenomenon, but that is not so. Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, and Vietnam have state-dominated media, but so do Ethiopia, Iran, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe (with Venezuela rapidly moving that way). In all these countries, communist, postcommunist, and noncommunist alike, established systems circumscribe news and information for mass audiences and shape the dominant political narrative. What is more, a number of

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democratically elected governments with authoritarian leanings, such as those in Ecuador, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Ukraine, use similar techniques.

To enforce their will, old-school authoritarians relied on huge coercive establishments plus strong, centrally controlled, and ideology-infused party organizations. Russia and China both retain large state-security apparats, of course, but neither has a party of the classic sort. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) is no more, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains in power but freely trims its ideology to "suit policy decisions taken on non-ideological grounds."[1] Coercion is crucial in both cases, but in neither country can authoritarian power be sustained by force alone—and the rulers know it.

This is where state-controlled media come in. With no guiding ideology such as communism to lean on, regimes use media to fill the void, offering a mix of consumerism, nationalism, anti-Americanism, and other intellectual currents to keep the regime "above water" in terms of popular support.[2]

State-controlled media do not exist solely to praise the powers that be, however. A vital companion function is to trash and discredit alternatives to the authoritarian status quo before these can gain traction with citizens at large. In this way, state-run media are a tool for marginalizing any potential political opposition or civic movement. Without meaningful access to the airwaves, opposition groups find it hard to reach potential supporters or become significant voices in the public discussion.

Although contemporary authoritarians still see their ability to repress dissent with force as crucial and have no plans to give it up, China, Russia, and others now tend to take a more selective approach to applying the truncheon.[3] Their reasons are pragmatic: Aspirations to economic modernization and prosperity cannot subsist alongside brutal, wholesale repression and the restrictions on information flow that this would require.

Aside from outliers such as Cuba, North Korea, and Turkmenistan, today's authoritarian regimes do not seek total domination of all the means of mass communication. What they want instead is what we might call "effective media control"—enough for them to convey their strength and puff up their claims to legitimacy while undermining potential alternatives. Such state dominance—whether exerted through overtly state-run or merely state-pliable media outlets—enables regimes to put progovernment narratives front and center while using the power of editorial omission to limit systematic criticism of official policies and actions.

When it comes to doing this, China is a leader. Beijing's propagandists are skillful appropriators, having learned the public-relations methods commonly used in Western politics and then adapted them to Chinese conditions. China Central Television (CCTV) engages a massive audi-

ence, hundreds of millions strong, as an instrument of state control, driving popular consciousness of news and events and managing messages in popular entertainment.[4] CCTV represents an authoritarian media entity that has achieved a degree of commercial success in combination with systematic, albeit calibrated, repression. It is a media conglomerate (with arms that now operate beyond as well as within China) that is financially profitable, operationally autonomous, and ideologically reliable. Its prominence owes much to the work that Chinese-government regulators have done to limit potential competitors. Its advertisers are state enterprises or private companies eager to curry favor with state officials. The end result is a quasi-commercial media environment in which the party-state retains a dominant editorial hand.

The prominence that we accord CCTV is no accident: State-controlled media can and do take many forms, but television is number one. Like the legendary bank robber Willie Sutton, who reputedly said that he robbed banks because "that's where the money is," authoritarian regimes focus on television because it is overwhelmingly where the eyeballs are. In most societies, it is the main source to which people turn for news and information. Television coverage—both what is shown and how it is shown—determines and shapes the content of mainstream political discourse. Moreover, what is on TV defines popular perceptions of how much power a regime possesses.

Television still has no real competitors. Internet access and use are growing, in some cases rapidly, and new technologies are making it possible for ordinary citizens to access a wider variety of information and to communicate with one another quickly and inexpensively. Social media can also help to shape narratives, especially with regard to shared grievances, and are altering mechanisms of collective action.[5] Yet new media are in what could be called an "insurgency phase" of their development and still have a long way to go before they can challenge television's primacy in authoritarian societies.

Among other things, the online world suffers from being more splintered. Authoritarian regimes by their nature focus tightly on staying in power and thus use state media systematically toward this end. State-controlled television delivers an unchecked regime message to its audiences. The Internet, by contrast, is a cacophony of many discordant voices—not the best platform for promoting a unified, coherent opposition to the powers that be.

How State Control of the Media Works

What methods have enabled state-media systems—which include not only television but also newspapers, radio, and new media, all backed by politically tilted police and courts—to endure in the current era of rapid technological and communications advances, particularly in the areas of

the Internet and social media? In order to achieve effective dominance, state-controlled media in authoritarian regimes seek to influence four distinct audiences. Listed in order of their importance to the regime, these audiences are 1) elites from the regime's own coalition; 2) the populace at large; 3) the country's regular Internet users; and 4) the political opposition and independent civil society.

Elites from the regime coalition. Authoritarian regimes must always worry about their own elites, who have both a large stake in whether the regime's prospects are good or bad and a higher-than-average ability to "stay on the winning side" by "going mobile" with their allegiances. State-controlled media must make it a mission to reassure these regime mainstays that the incumbent ruler (or ruling circle) stands secure, making continued unity and loyalty to the regime the "smart play."

Clear media dominance signals to key ruling-coalition members that defections will be punished, including through media smear campaigns. In this context, what the media are saying at any given moment is less important than the ruling circle's ability to show that it can impose any message it desires. Authoritarians are well aware that, as Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter have pointed out, unfree regimes can begin to crack up if and when regime moderates locate and contact opposition moderates with whom they can negotiate.[6] Keeping parts of the regime elite from breaking away and looking for the exits is a crucial regime goal and hence a crucial task of the regime's media.

In China, the CCP uses its media dominance to send signals to a number of essential elite audiences. These include members of the CCP leadership itself as well as the state bureaucracy and China's large, growing, and inextricably CCP-linked business community. Anne-Marie Brady has observed the vitally important role that China's state-controlled media plays as the "fourth governmental branch" (rather than a "fourth estate") and its favored place in communicating to elites messages that support the party-state system.[7]

Russia's President Vladimir Putin uses the media to display his power to key groups. He particularly wants to keep in line the *siloviki* (strongmen) who staff the military, the police forces, and the state-security apparatus. Other target audiences for Putin's trademark shows of strength (which have included ringside attendance at a bareknuckle-fighting tournament alongside Belgian action star Jean-Claude Van Damme and widely distributed photographs of a shirtless Putin riding horses and toting a rifle to hunt wolves) include the state bureaucracy and the business community, especially the energy companies and other natural-resource producers that play such a huge role in the Russian economy. Putin's domination of the airwaves reminds these groups that they benefit from his status as paramount leader and should fear both his displeasure and what might happen were he to leave the scene.

The late-2012 passage by the U.S. Congress of the Magnitsky Act set up a test of Putin's hold on his elites. Named for Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who died in a Moscow prison in 2009 after being jailed for exposing official corruption, the law imposes official U.S. sanctions (travel and banking bans) on a list of named Russian officials. Its passage was an attempt to show individual members of Putin's elite that they could be held personally responsible for violating human rights at home. After the U.S. government published a list of eighteen Russian sanctionees in April 2013, officials of the Putin regime appeared on prominent state-television programs to dismiss and disparage the sanctions. Although this U.S. legislation may have encouraged some of the Moscow elite to feel that supporting Putin would no longer serve their interests, the national television appearances by these figures signaled to key players that Putin's Kremlin would not yield in demanding their continued loyalty.

Similarly, the Kremlin can use its tame media as a way to keep regional executives in line. During the crackdown on the opposition that followed Putin's inauguration for a third presidential term in May 2012, state-controlled media heaped special praise on governors who had ordered the arrest of opposition activists.

The populace at large. State-dominated media work to make mass audiences respect and fear the regime, but just as important is the task of breeding apathy and passivity. The regime media's main method here is a mix of deflection, distortion, and distraction that promotes what democracy scholar Ivan Krastev calls "zombie authoritarianism."[8]

In order to stay in power, an authoritarian regime must keep vast numbers of people out of politics. State-controlled media can help by uniformly stressing the benefits of the status quo and demonizing any opposition to it. Warnings that the costs of pursuing change will be excessive and its advantages illusory have a deflating, demobilizing effect. Contemporary state-controlled authoritarian media typically traffic in many of the tropes that Albert O. Hirschman anatomized several decades ago in his classic study of reactionary rhetoric. Broadcasts variously attempt to show that political change will end in futility or even in results that are the reverse of those intended, and that it will impose unacceptable costs or consequences on society.[9]

Since the protests that broke out in Russia over dubious parliamentary elections in December 2011, the regime's media strategy has been aimed at reducing popular activism through entertainment. Why turn out for a street rally or join a civic group when something compelling such as *Dom-2,* a version of the *Big Brother* reality-TV series, is on? In its manner of dealing with the mass public, the Putin regime has begun to mimic the methods of the late-Soviet period, which emphasized entertainment rather than political mobilization.

State-controlled television is the main tool. In authoritarian countries, it is typically where three-quarters or more of the populace turns for political news. In China, even with the explosive growth of the Internet, news consumption is principally through state-television networks. In Russia, 88 percent of respondents to a June 2013 Levada Center poll said that they get their news about the country and the world through television.[10] No other source drew higher than a 25 percent response. In the same survey, 51 percent said that they believed the broadcasts. That figure remains significant, even if it represents a sharp drop from the 79 percent who expressed trust in Russian television in an August 2009 survey. Evidence from countries as diverse as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, Iran, and Vietnam paints a picture of state-controlled television's prominence and influence not unlike the one seen in Russia.

Still, as the 28-point drop-off in trust suggests, many Russians who follow state-controlled media are skeptical of what they see. Ellen Mickiewicz's research on Russian television viewers indicates that they do not simply accept what the Kremlin-controlled channels present, but instead process it in complex ways that are at variance with what ruling circles intend.[11] The growing distrust of state-controlled television in Russia may herald limits to the model of media-bred passivity.

Yet television and other official communications have proven effective at getting across the message that actively contesting the authorities will be costly. Large majorities have absorbed the idea that they can do little to change the situation.[12] They remain apathetic and apolitical. The regimes in Beijing, Moscow, and other authoritarian capitals have forged state-controlled media systems that suggest behaviors consistent with those which Barbara Geddes and John Zaller observed regarding the military dictatorship that ran Brazil from 1964 to 1985. In particular, they noted that "the principal effect of exposure to progovernment communications is to persuade the politically apathetic to become at least passive supporters of government policy."[13] In other words, even if the state-television audience does not necessarily believe what it sees, it behaves as if it does.

Finally, it bears mention that many authoritarian regimes find their core bases of support among rural residents and less-educated city dwellers—groups that state-controlled media have shown themselves particularly effective at reaching. In China, these constituencies continue to form CCTV's main audience as younger and better-educated Chinese citizens gravitate toward the Internet. Russian state television is careful to feed people living in the regions a steady diet of coverage that depicts Russia as surrounded by threats from abroad and especially the United States. Viewers with little in the way of education or experience that might tell them otherwise tend to take the state media on faith when it comes to (harshly) judging U.S. intentions or policies. It is no

overstatement to say that anti-Americanism is in many ways the closest thing to a unifying "ideology" that the Kremlin has nowadays, and plays an important legitimating role for the CCP as well.

People who are strongly "plugged in" to the Internet. Like television, the Internet is something that authoritarian rulers and their minions are now realizing that they must try to control. The freewheeling world of online communications and discourse is increasingly worrying them. In order to get a handle on it, the forces of state propaganda and censorship are turning to methods that have proven useful in the "management" of traditional media. Yet the task is not the same: Exerting control over key political content of a central television network is a lot easier than reining in such information online. But authoritarian regimes are displaying great determination and an eye for innovation in achieving their objectives. As with traditional media, the restrictive measures being tested are not designed to block everything, but instead are chiefly aimed at obstructing news about politics or other sensitive issues from consistently reaching key audiences. As Internet use and penetration increase in authoritarian countries—and with graphic evidence on hand from Russia and the Arab world of how helpful Web-based tools can be in organizing mass protests—authoritarian regimes are working harder than ever to find ways of impeding the circulation of credible political information through cyberspace.

The Internet's spread has been remarkable, and many authoritarian systems are part of the trend—indeed, their governments have little choice in the matter unless they want to try ruling the next North Korea. Economic growth and development require being "wired." Thus in fast-growing but authoritarian Vietnam, 40 percent of the populace has Internet access. In Belarus (notorious as "Europe's last dictatorship"), Kazakhstan, and Saudi Arabia, that figure is even higher at approximately 55 percent. China is at 45 percent Internet penetration and now has nearly 600 million Internet users and more than 300 million microbloggers, most of them on Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter. In Russia, which recently passed the 50 percent Internet-access mark, Web-based media such as TV Rain are helping the opposition to reach larger audiences.

As the Internet looms larger, so does authoritarian political interference with it. Until recently, Russia used relatively subtle and sophisticated techniques "designed to shape and affect when and how information is received by users, rather than denying access outright."[14] In this light, Russia's 2012 law allowing the government to shut down sites with inappropriate content—as well as a decree developed by the Communications Ministry and the FSB (the KGB's successor) and slated to take effect in 2014 that will require Internet service providers to monitor all Internet traffic, including IP addresses, telephone numbers, and

usernames—mark a clear step backward in terms of Internet freedom. On 1 September 2013, Vietnam put into effect Decree 72, an ambitious measure that looks to ban online users in the country from discussing current events and sharing news articles. China's government, meanwhile, sets the pace when it comes to online censorship and has also become a leading developer of sophisticated methods for suppressing political communication online. Beijing readily shares its expertise with other regimes, reportedly including those in Belarus, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Even as countries such as Belarus, Vietnam, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States see fast growth in Internet access, Freedom House rates them as becoming *less* free online.[15] Such rankings indicate that in these countries a "negative convergence" may be taking place in which the news content of new media is being subjected to enhanced control just as old media long have been.

Despite the seeming universality of the Internet, the distinct political and media environment of each country shapes and constrains the impact that online communication has there.[16] The overall political environment in Russia and China includes inducements to self-censorship that are prevalent among the journalists who work in the state-controlled media. The state can also punish bloggers and other Internet users for expressing the "wrong" opinions online. The example of Alexei Navalny, the prominent blogger and activist who has exposed extensive corruption in Russian officialdom and has faced serious—and what many view as concocted—criminal charges for alleged financial improprieties, illustrates this crude but effective technique. The lack of independent courts makes such repression all too easy.

Ironically, however, the Internet's vast diversity and openness to any number of narratives and counternarratives may cripple new media's ability to loosen the grip of a well-organized authoritarian elite determined to stay in power. State-controlled media celebrate the status quo. Alternative online content can challenge the state-controlled narrative in specific ways, raising awareness of problems involving the environment, ethnic relations, corruption, judicial failures, lapses in healthcare provision, and so on. But these disparate stories and critiques—even leaving aside how hard it will be for them to move a truly mass audience—will not necessarily add up to a coherent argument for turning out the regime. Russians, for instance, are organizing to demand their rights in concrete instances—protesting the loss of a beloved architectural treasure or park, or demanding healthcare for ordinary citizens—but they are not coalescing to change the overall political system, particularly after the crackdowns that Putin launched in 2012.

In China, the authorities have fine-tuned their Internet censorship by working to curtail *any* content (whatever its substance) that looks as if it might promote social mobilization. The idea is to arrest or forestall independent collective activity, period.[17] The CCP took this effort to a

new level in September 2013, when it began a fierce crackdown on microblogging by opinion leaders.

Much of China's Internet censorship consists of private web portals such as Sina.com doing the party-state's bidding by policing their own sites to comply with (or even anticipate) CCP directives. Old-school totalitarians were do-it-yourselfers; modern authoritarians like to outsource and, where possible, use market forces to enhance censorship capacity. Beijing still has official censors. But it knows that they are not enough, so it farms much of the dirty work out to the private sector by making sure that commercial success and even survival require resolute efforts to toe the party line. In meeting state-set goals, companies are encouraged to innovate. Twitter and other foreign services that refuse to comply with local censorship standards simply find themselves shut out of the vast Chinese market.

Moreover, Beijing, Moscow, and other authoritarian governments are increasingly using sophisticated online methods of manipulation to manufacture "white noise" as a way of confusing potential oppositionists. Automated accounts, or "bots," that are directly or indirectly supported by these regimes spread government propaganda and attack independent civic movements and political opposition with the aim of "muddying the waters" when politically consequential issues are under discussion.

Not all that long ago, it was widely assumed that the Internet would set off geysers of information everywhere, with political change sure to follow. Instead, it looks as if methods for taming political expression on traditional media are being adapted and applied to new media with increasing effect. The trend of "negative convergence," in which the space for meaningful political expression online shrinks and moves in the direction of less free traditional media, has profoundly troubling implications. The range of restrictive measures, some overt, but others more subtle and sophisticated, that Beijing, Moscow, and their imitators have been taking should at the very least make us ask whether the Internet can withstand the authoritarian encroachment and anchor itself as an open platform for political discussion in authoritarian states.

The opposition and civil society. In democracies, open media are the lifeblood of civil society and political opposition. In authoritarian regimes, state-controlled media seek to isolate civil society organizations from society at large, with the idea of preventing any political coordination between the former and the latter. To this end, state-run media try to discredit in the public's mind any notion of a political alternative to the existing regime. Media attacks delegitimize civil society and the opposition, paving the way for other repressive measures aimed at them. For instance, an authoritarian regime that wants to convict a civil society leader of far-fetched criminal charges will often first "soften up the target" by making that leader the subject of unfavorable media coverage.

State-run media typically accuse oppositionists of wanting to cause chaos, a charge that may resonate widely and deeply in societies with histories of political instability. Relatedly, regime critics may be painted as witting or unwitting tools of the West, a popular ploy in countries as diverse as China, Zimbabwe, Azerbaijan, and Russia. International broadcasters such as the BBC, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia are typically blocked, thereby stripping civil society of key channels for obtaining independent news and communicating with domestic audiences.

Opposition spokespersons, as a rule, never receive direct access to state-run media's jealously guarded audience. When it seems like the tactically astute thing to do—there may be times when overtly denouncing someone will only breed more publicity or even sympathy—the regime will make a critic figuratively disappear from public discourse. Russian state-controlled television, particularly the NTV network, has repeatedly given nationwide airtime to sensationalistic programs that suggest human-rights activists and other reformers are working for outside interests, or are otherwise seeking to harm the Russian state. Among these programs was "Anatomy of a Protest," a purported documentary that was shown in 2012 in order to undermine the demonstrations that broke out in Moscow and other cities following flawed parliamentary and presidential elections. State-controlled media sought to tar muckrakers such as Navalny and Magnitsky as personally corrupt (the latter was still being defamed after his death in prison) even as these figures courageously strove to bring official wrongdoing to light. The lesson for anyone who might be thinking of imitating them is clear.

Is such vicious treatment directly ordered from on high? Very possibly it is not, if only because no overt command is necessary. The state-run media, like Henry II's entourage, is constantly poised to attack any latter-day Thomas Beckets and may not even need to hear a seemingly offhand "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" from the lips of power. In today's Russia and countries like it, the regime likely sees self-censorship as the best censorship, and "spontaneous" attacks on critics as the best attacks. In the former case, the spirit of the state censor has been internalized, and in the latter the higher-ups need never lift an incriminating finger or utter a guilty word—what they want done is understood implicitly and requires no discussion.

In China today, all major newspapers and broadcasting concerns are registered with the state or the CCP, and remain subject to state institutions (most importantly, the Propaganda Department) that have authority to dictate editorial guidelines. When it comes to sensitive matters such as Tibet, only regime-friendly commentators receive airtime.[18]

The power that political authorities wield over editorial content is dramatically illustrated by the case of Liu Xiaobo. A literary intellectual who went to jail for steadfastly arguing against continued one-party

rule, he was little known outside the rarefied circles of human-rights activists and China experts. Few outside the Middle Kingdom had ever heard of him. That changed on 8 October 2010, when the Nobel Committee in Oslo announced that Liu was to be awarded the Peace Prize for his "long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China." Suddenly, the world news was full of headlines about this brave, peaceful dissident who had been thrown into a Chinese prison solely for speaking his mind and advocating things that citizens of democratic countries take completely for granted.

Liu had been charged a year earlier with "inciting subversion of state power," an article in China's criminal code often used to silence critics of CCP primacy. The offense took the form of his participation in drafting and circulating the prodemocracy manifesto Charter 08. The wider world may have been celebrating Liu's courage and stirring commitment to high, humane principles, but Chinese television viewers heard not a peep about him. Only China's online community was able to evade censorship and official blackouts to get news of the first Chinese person to win the Peace Prize.

In Russia, public-affairs shows on the main television outlets—Channel One, Rossiya, and NTV—feature a reliable cast of government-approved pundits. Opposition figures, activists, and social critics rarely, if ever, are invited to appear. A few activists, including opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov and Lyudmila Alexeyeva, are known because their public careers date back to before the beginning of the Putin era. Yet none holds much sway with the Russian public—they have been shut out of the media for too long. Younger activists are sedulously kept off widely watched television programming. Speaking on Ekho Moskvy radio on 22 May 2013, Vladimir Posner, the former Soviet propaganda apparatchik who now hosts a leading talk show on state-owned Channel One television, admitted that "there are a number of people . . . whom I know that I cannot invite" to appear on the air. Among these, he listed opposition leaders Nemtsov, Navalny, and Vladimir Ryzhkov.[19] Media under state control create towering obstacles that civil society and oppositionists find themselves hard-pressed to overcome as they strive to reach mass audiences with alternative visions of governance and political life.

State Media in Weak Democracies

The state-controlled media model reaches its fullest, most potent form in contexts of outright authoritarianism. Yet some of its characteristic features and techniques are proving attractive to democratically elected governments in countries where democracy is weak or in danger of backsliding toward authoritarianism. In Ecuador, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Ukraine, authorities are exerting effective control over traditional

electronic media while pursuing efforts to obstruct political speech online. Such developments have serious implications for the democratic prospects of these countries.

In Turkey, where the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has dominated politics and government for more than a decade, the depth of state influence on the broadcast media was laid bare during the massive antigovernment protests of June 2013. As activists filled Istanbul's Taksim Square, the country's main state-influenced media outlets showed documentaries about penguins and dolphin training. One ran a cooking show. Erdoğan called Twitter a "menace," and authorities cracked down on its users, arresting dozens on charges of publishing "misinformation." Government-friendly Turkish media outlets blamed the protests on unspecified foreign enemies. The media in Turkey have seen their independence corrode as unseemly business relationships have blossomed between major media owners and the government. These cozy arrangements make demands for political obedience hard to defy. The media has become complicit in the growing political intolerance of the ruling circles.

Nicaragua has moved toward state dominance of the media since Daniel Ortega's return to the presidency in 2007. Ortega now controls nearly half of the country's television news stations; his children run three of them. He has launched at least two news websites and is thought to be secretly operating state-supported blogs and social-media "troll centers" in order to intimidate opponents and independent forces. Political analysts say that this media power has given Ortega a tool to discredit critics, and that positive media exposure helped him to win a 63 percent landslide in November 2011, up dramatically from the 38 percent plurality that he won five years previously.[20]

Since winning election as president of Ukraine in 2010, Viktor Yanukovych has pursued a mass-media approach that seeks to mimic crucial aspects of the Kremlin's strategy. Television-news assets with national reach are either directly controlled by the government or belong to oligarchs with close official ties. The sole exception is TVi, a station that has retained a degree of independence but underwent a murky ownership change in mid-2013. During the run-up to the October 2012 parliamentary election, TVi came in for extensive harassment. In July, tax police raided its offices. Meanwhile, coverage of the government by the dominant broadcast-news outlets has become more sycophantic and less likely to apply any real scrutiny to official policies and actions.

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa has become known for his clampdowns (often via lawsuits demanding huge damage payments) on media outlets that dare to criticize his administration. In 2012, he canceled the broadcast license of Telesangay and closed Radio Morena, also an opposition outlet. He called for a boycott of "corrupt" private media. During a speech on May 29 of that year, he publicly tore up a copy of

the newspaper *La Hora,* shouting "Let them complain!"[21] He deploys his own highly charged weekly television and radio show, together with harsh and selective use of the law, to attack his critics in civil society and the opposition, signaling to rivals and allies alike who is up and who is down in presidential eyes.[22]

What Does It All Mean?

Some observers of contemporary authoritarianism have been tempted to consign state-controlled media to the category of anachronism. But that is a mistake: News of state-controlled media's demise as a serious political force is decidedly premature. The greater diversity of media today means less than meets the eye when it comes to critical political expression: Television still reigns supreme, and through it authoritarian regimes have learned to shape political discourse and impede the growth of links between civil society and the populace at large.

Authoritarian rulers know that they need state-controlled media to survive; hence meaningful liberalization of such media is unlikely. State-controlled media live in a kind of institutional limbo: They cannot become free until there is revolutionary change. The state's control over the media, once tightened, cannot readily be loosened without opening the floodgates and risking the regime itself. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last top official of the USSR, discovered this with his policy of *glasnost* (openness). He thought that he was saving the Soviet system via such reforms, when in fact he was signing its death warrant.

In an age when information flows on a vast scale and at lightning speed within and across national borders, it can be difficult to accept the notion that political news and information can be successfully circumscribed. Someone forgot to tell some of the world's more dogged authoritarians that the path to greater media openness is unavoidable. Authoritarian regimes have a single-minded focus on self-preservation; they will neither resign themselves to the free flow of political information nor abandon efforts to dominate their national media. They need the media systematically and relentlessly to impress on crucial audiences the idea that there is no acceptable alternative to the incumbent rulers. The Internet *may* offer a freer alternative to the state-dominated old media, but the very qualities that permit this (the diverse and decentralized character of the online world) also make the Internet a poor match for a laser-focused authoritarian state and its intensely disciplined messaging. Opposition voices may be freer to speak online, but can they put forth a coherent alternative to dominant regime narratives?

Perhaps the balance will change. New-media innovation may reduce fragmentation and allow reformers to drive the political conversation in a more cohesive and coherent way, but this is not clear yet. Another and

more ominous prospect is that state-controlled media endure as a major force while authoritarian regimes more aggressively pursue "convergence"—taming the new media as they have tamed the old. In this grim scenario, the illiberal values of traditional state-controlled media triumph and overshadow those of the freer new media. Absent political change basic enough to enable authentic media reform, can new media resist the forces of authoritarian control stoutly enough to keep meaningful political discourse alive? And if they do, can the independent political news and information that new media offer make inroads deep and numerous enough to effect change in systems where so many citizens remain a kind of captive audience for the old state-run media?

The state's control over the media, once tightened, cannot readily be loosened without opening the floodgates and risking the regime itself.

Today, authoritarian governments are willfully depriving hundreds of millions of people of authentically plural and independent information and analysis. The current attempts at democratic transitions in North Africa and Asia will tell us much about the possibilities for reforming state-controlled media and bringing about democratic change. Whether and how traditional state-run media break down and new media grow roots in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Burma will be integral to their larger democratic fortunes and to this broader understanding.

Thomas Jefferson believed that the people need "full information of their affairs thro[ugh] the channel of the public papers," for a healthy democracy depends on an informed citizenry that enjoys access to the free flow of ideas and debate on matters of civic importance. Successful authoritarianism, in stark contrast, absorbs newspapers into the government (whether formally or in fact) and survives by narrowing the flow of ideas on the issues that matter most in order to ensure that its citizens remain quiescent because unaware.

NOTES

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