

# Research

Feature

## Fake News and Propaganda

How Governments Distort News Coverage

**There is a thin line between news bias, fake news, and propaganda. Just look at the current debate about manipulation of the media in the U.S. While mass media is believed to play a powerful role in democracies, the ability of the media to perform its prescribed role as the “watchdog” has been questioned.**

David Yanagizawa-Drott, Professor at the University of Zurich, provides new insights to this problem by addressing the question about government distortion and news coverage bias in several research projects. Two of them focus on government distortion in the U.S. using data from the cold war. A third project aims at understanding the mechanisms of propaganda, providing evidence from the Rwandan genocide.

### Government distortion and news bias in the U.S.

The United States have always been very proud of their media system that mainly consists of independently owned media. Accordingly, U.S. citizens consider free speech and a free press a fundamental human right that has to be well protected. In a recently published study, Yanagizawa-Drott and Nancy Qian (Yale University) put the independently owned media in the U.S. to the test and revealed some disturbing insights. Using data from 1946 to 2010, they document that U.S. news coverage of human rights abuses committed by foreign governments was associated with membership in the United Nations Security Council. In fact, the data shows that news coverage of human rights abuses increased for those countries in the UN Security Council that were not politically allied to the U.S. In contrast, membership reduced news coverage of bad behavior for strongly allied countries.

The study provides evidence that government distortion can systematically exist in a highly competitive media market amongst independently owned media. The fact that this can occur in a democratic regime known for media independence suggests that market forces are not always a sufficient guarantee against government influence. However, the findings only apply to the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations from 1981 to 1992, a period during which the government was known to have actively influenced the press. This suggests that

perhaps government distortion would not have been sustainable over time.

### Strategic determinants of U.S. human rights reporting

In a related study, Yanagizawa-Drott – again with Nancy Qian – analyzes U.S. human rights reporting during the Cold War, comparing the U.S. State Department reports to Amnesty International human rights reporting. They argue that trust and reliability are important factors when it comes to choosing between several business partners. An investor, for instance, has to choose between multiple countries for his business transactions. Put yourself in his position. Where would you rather invest your money, in stable countries that uphold human rights or in countries where human rights are being violated? You would probably choose the former, which is in line with the findings of a study on private firms in the U.S. Indeed, researchers found that Foreign Direct Investment decisions correlate with U.S. State Department reports on the levels of human rights violations.

One could argue that using human rights as a determinant of private investment and economic policy is not an obvious cause for particular concern. However, critics of the U.S. State Department have complained that it unfairly biases its human rights reports against countries with opposing ideologies and favors countries that are strategically valuable to the U.S. Hence, the image provided of certain countries may be deliberately distorted. Depending on the extent to which firms and non-government organizations depend on the information provided by the U.S. State Department,

*this manipulation might have far-reaching economic consequences,*

as Yanagizawa-Drott and Qian point out. The results show that the U.S. and Amnesty International have similar reports for countries not allied with the U.S., and they show that these countries on average do not change over time. In contrast, the U.S. reports describe allied countries more favorably during the Cold War. Interestingly, the distortion ended immediately after the Cold War for those countries that turned into nonallies after the Cold War.



One of the two major Rwandan radio stations, RTLM, provided the most extreme and inflammatory messages.

In sum, both studies make the point that the strategic determinants of biases of primary information sources is an avenue that should be seriously researched. The results suggest that the U.S. may manipulate its reports on foreign countries in order to justify financially supporting allies, which could have far-reaching economic consequences.

### **Propaganda and conflict**

In another study that focuses on the Rwandan genocide, Yanagizawa-Drott takes a different perspective while still concentrating on government distortion and the media. The study on the Rwandan genocide deals with the question on the role of mass media in time of conflict and state-sponsored mass violence against civilians.

Elites in control of autocratic states have repeatedly used mass media – often under their direct control – with the intention of inducing participation in and citizen support of violence against certain groups. Yet it is an open question whether and how propaganda that explicitly encourages violence against a certain group can in fact directly induce violence against that group. In order to address this question, Yanagizawa-Drott investigates the role of mass media in the spread of violence during the 1994 Rwandan genocide by estimating the effects of propaganda disseminated via radio. The radio was the dominant medium for the government to deliver messages to the population.

The results show that the broadcasts led to more violence during the genocide. Furthermore, Yanagizawa-Drott finds that the broadcasts exhibited

positive spillover effects in militia violence, meaning that when propaganda triggered violence in one village, this in turn led to violence spreading to neighboring villages. Finally, the analysis suggests that the radio station caused 10% of the total participation in the genocide, which corresponds to approximately 51,000 casualties.

*The study provides evidence that mass media can affect conflict in general and genocide violence against an ethnic minority in particular.*

The findings are of significant relevance for the policy debate regarding restrictions on mass media, especially in case of state-sponsored mass violence. The international debate during the Rwandan genocide is illustrative. The U.S. did not approve of interrupting radio broadcasts, claiming that it would impinge on the fundamental human right to free speech and a free press. However, the results of Yanagizawa-Drott's study suggests that many lives could have been saved if the international community had jammed radio signals during the Rwandan genocide.

### **Methods of distorting the truth**

Professor Yanagizawa-Drott's research points to a fundamental problem of our time. Mass media often referred to as the fourth estate, not without reason, as it plays a powerful role in democracies. It reaches an immense audience, and its content can affect a wide range of outcomes, including political behavior such as voting. Of course, bending the truth for political gain is nothing new and the record of its uses stretches back to ancient times. However, while the intentions may remain the same, the communication means have undergone a massive change. The social media revolution allowed people to exchange information on a much greater scale than ever before, while publishing platforms like WordPress allowed anyone to create a dynamic website with ease. It removed the economic barriers for publishing and distributing news almost completely. With the economic barriers removed, 2016 proved a much more fertile breeding ground for fake news than previous years. In light of Prof. Yanagizawa-Drott's findings, that should

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unsettle us. It may seem exaggerated to compare government distortion in U.S. independent media with propaganda during the Rwandan genocide. However, although propaganda and fake news are not the same, they do hold similarities: both are methods of distorting the truth for emotional persuasion, seeking to drive action.

### References

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