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

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.

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
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


Prof. David Yanagizawa-Drott is Professor for Development and Emerging Markets at the Department of Economics, University of Zurich, and Affiliated Professor at the UBS Center.

Before joining the University of Zurich, he was an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Harvard University.

He is a member of the Poverty Action Lab (PAL), the Bureau for Research and Economic Analysis of Development (BREAD), and the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER).

His research interests include political economics and economic development, with current focus on culture, conflict, and globalization.