

Information Control in Autocracies: A Review Essay

Malika Talgatova

Abstract

The study of information control has matured into a crucial subfield at the intersection of political science, communication, and computational social science. The literature has made important strides in theorizing information control and has increasingly relied on diverse methodological approaches, including experiments, text-as-data methods, and the analysis of large-scale digital trace data, often supported by advances in machine learning and AI. We now understand that censorship, propaganda, surveillance, and repression should be seen as producing integrated systems of control that should be studied as such. Despite this progress, there are open questions. The field has yet to reach a definitive understanding of the long-term effects of information control—on public opinion, those who produce information, or overall regime stability. We also need to understand why certain individuals or groups are more resistant to state narratives—and how alternative sources of information manage to break through in tightly controlled environments. Technological advance also continues to reshape the information environment, requiring the field to keep pace with new forms of digital adaptation, from algorithmic content moderation to synthetic media.

Keywords: information control; authoritarianism; repression; censorship; propaganda; digital authoritarianism

Author

Malika Talgatova

2022-2023 Dissertation Fellow

Email: mtalgato@ucsd.edu

Suggested Citation

Talgatova, Malika. 2026. *Information Control in Autocracies: A Review Essay*. IGCC Working Paper No 2.

1. Introduction

In autocracies, control over information is crucial to the existential trade-offs that leaders face: managing threats from elites requires credible information about elite intentions and preferences; managing threats from below requires information about public preferences, grievances, and support. At the foundation of effective authoritarian governance and authoritarian survival is the autocrat's ability to manage information flows both to and from the autocrat (e.g., Egorov and Sonin 2024, Anceschi 2015, 13). As Roberts (2020, 404) puts it, those who control which information individuals receive can potentially shape what individuals believe and when they engage or disengage with political life. For this reason, I use the term *information control* to refer to a broad repertoire that includes not only restricting access to information, but also producing, curating, and steering information—and doing so through a mix of state agencies, formal institutions, platforms, and proxy actors.

Digital technologies have reshaped the terrain on which these strategies operate. The scale and speed of communication, the emergence of platform-mediated visibility, and the rise of networked intermediaries have changed both the opportunities and constraints of authoritarian governance, and scholarship has responded accordingly. A wave of new studies has been accompanied by valuable reviews across key substrands such as censorship, repression, and propaganda (e.g., Roberts 2020; Hassan, Mattingly and Nugent 2022; Earl, Maher and Pan 2022; Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024).

Scholars frequently present the autocrat's options as a menu: a regime may choose to rely on censorship, repression, propaganda, surveillance, or co-optation in varying combinations. The tools are treated as discrete, sometimes mutually exclusive, and implicitly exhaustive choices. For instance, Hassan, Mattingly and Nugent (2022) identifies repression, indoctrination, coercive distribution, and infiltration as distinct tactics of political control. Similarly, Kim et al. (2024) centers on repression, co-optation, and indoctrination. While Guriev and Treisman (2020) conceptualizes propaganda as an alternative to repression, Gitmez, Molavi and Sonin (2025) argues that these strategies are in fact complementary and often move in unison.

Many of these reviews emphasize the need to integrate the shifting dynamics of the digital information ecosystem into more traditional accounts of information control (e.g., Keremoğlu and Weidmann 2020; Earl, Maher and Pan 2022; Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024). I, too, approach the toolkit under a broader umbrella of information control. Whether autocrats are censoring news, attacking dissident voices, controlling media ownership, co-opting influencers, deploying bots, or crafting alternative narratives, their core objective is the same: to distort the public's perception of reality

by manipulating the information environment. In this sense, all the tactics in the toolkit serve to obscure some true signal—preventing the population from forming an accurate or complete understanding of the world around them.¹ This review, thus, subscribes to this emerging consensus but pushes it in a specific direction: it brings the standard boxes—censorship, propaganda, and repression—into conversation with newer or newly salient strategies such as disinformation, algorithmic amplification, and content creation and flooding, with the goal of clarifying how these tools combine into integrated systems of control.

A core reason this integration is increasingly necessary is that contemporary strategies often blur the boundary between suppression and production. Disinformation, at its current scale, is not simply the opposite of censorship. It can be a form of productive control that overwhelms, distorts, and distracts rather than silences—while also silencing as a second-order effect, if citizens lose trust in information and disengage. These newer tools complicate the tidy categories scholars have traditionally used. Disinformation does not always come from official state channels; it may circulate through proxies, trolls, or manipulated influencers (e.g., Starbird, DiResta and DeButts 2023). Similarly, flooding and algorithmic amplification can suppress without removing oppositional content: instead of deletion, regimes can bury sensitive narratives beneath emotionally charged, distracting or regime-friendly material. In that sense, what looks like “more information control” is often better understood as a shift in emphasis toward environmental control—steering attention, shaping perceived social consensus, and altering the informational context in which citizens interpret events.

This review makes three contributions. First, it offers a simple conceptual map that places “old” and “new” instruments within the same frame, highlighting how strategies differ not only by whether they restrict or produce information, but also by whether they target overtly political content or ostensibly non-political domains that nonetheless shape social order and regime resilience. Second, it synthesizes what we know about effects across distinct targets: not only citizens as information consumers, but also journalists, activists, and other information providers who respond strategically to monitoring, sanctions, and shifting incentives. Third, it identifies points of convergence across fragmented literatures and draws out a research agenda centered on the fusion of hard and soft, visible and covert, and state and networked forms of control that define contemporary authoritarian information strategies.

¹ This is not to say that alternative information is never available. In many cases, it is—but individuals may choose not to seek it out (e.g., Chen and Yang 2019, 2295), perhaps because they do not perceive government-provided information as biased or false. Voluntary regime supporters often play a key role in legitimizing official narratives and defending the regime against criticism, as shown in Han (2015) and Shao, Liu and Wang (2024).

The review proceeds as follows. I first develop the conceptual framework and show how it accommodates classic tools (censorship, propaganda, repression) alongside emergent strategies (disinformation, amplification, flooding) while bringing attention to a more all-encompassing regime's approach to information control. I then review these instruments, with the emphasis on the forms they may take. Next, I synthesize the evidence on effects, emphasizing observed general patterns and heterogeneous impacts across contexts. I conclude by outlining open questions about measurement, attribution, the evolving role of platforms and proxy actors in authoritarian information control, and broader trends of autocratization and democratic backsliding.

Most works cited here, excluding seminal articles, are published within the last 10 years, reflecting the rapid evolution of both the empirical landscape and the scholarly literature. I prioritize contributions that (i) clarify mechanisms of control, (ii) connect instruments to observable outcomes for publics and information providers, and (iii) speak to how digital infrastructures and networked intermediaries reshape authoritarian strategies.

2. Theorizing Information Control

Media environments are not merely arenas of contestation in autocracies; they are also infrastructures of legitimation and crisis management. In Russia, for example, broadcast media has been used to prime the domestic public for the invasion of Ukraine in the lead up to February 2022 (Goode 2022), to normalize the reality of war in everyday life (Goode 2025), and, during the highly visible Prigozhin mutiny, to do damage control by framing mutineers as terrorists and traitors (Goode 2023). These episodes illustrate a broader point: contemporary authoritarian information control rarely relies on a single instrument. Instead, regimes combine narrative production with suppression of alternatives, often across platforms and channels, to steer what becomes salient, credible, and collectively acknowledged.

Conceptually, information control can be organized around two overarching strategies: *information suppression* and *information production*. Suppression refers to strategies that raise the cost, risk, or feasibility of accessing, producing, or circulating certain information—through deletion, throttling, legal restrictions, intimidation, harassment, or other forms of coercion. Production refers to strategies that increase the supply, visibility, or perceived plausibility of preferred information—through propaganda, narrative engineering, amplification, flooding, agenda-setting, or the cultivation of seemingly organic cues of consensus. Repression and censorship fall squarely into the suppression category, while propaganda, distraction, and narrative engineering are tools of production.

Some measures, such as media capture, straddle both categories: they can suppress unfavorable content while simultaneously promoting regime-aligned messages. Or, for example, a DDoS attack may suppress both political and non-political information; the repression of a journalist may reduce sensitive coverage (suppression) while also encouraging regime-friendly content via self-censorship or substitution (production). In what follows, I treat such overlap as substantively meaningful rather than as a classificatory failure. When a tactic plausibly does both, I classify it by its primary mechanism (cost-raising vs. salience/credibility shaping) while emphasizing that many strategies are best understood as hybrid.

A second distinction that is increasingly salient across recent literature is between efforts directed at political versus non-political content. I use “political” content to refer to information that directly implicates regime legitimacy, elite cohesion, political accountability, or collective action (e.g., criticism of incumbents, corruption exposures, opposition organizing, protest coordination). “Non-political” content includes domains that do not primarily speak to these threats, but can still matter for authoritarian governance and social order, including morality, religion, sexuality, public health, culture, and entertainment. This distinction is analytically useful not because these domains are inherently apolitical, but because regimes frequently treat them as distinct governance problems and deploy different repertoires across them. In practice, non-political issues can become politically charged—public health and sexuality are obvious examples—and content can shift categories over time as it becomes politicized by mobilization or crisis. Feminist theory’s assertion that “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1970) usefully underscores why clean boundaries are difficult. Still, within political science, the political/non-political distinction remains a common and defensible conceptual move (e.g., Esberg 2020; Yang 2025), especially for organizing empirical work that otherwise spans very different substantive domains.

Together, these two axes yield a simple typology (Table 1) that places “old” and “new” instruments within the same conceptual frame. The goal is not to claim novelty for the dimensions themselves—Earl, Maher and Pan (2022), for instance, draws a related distinction between information control and information channeling—but to show that this map remains analytically useful for reorganizing a rapidly expanding literature, including work on tools that operate through ranking, saturation, filtering, and automation. At minimum, the framework offers a tractable way to compare strategies that might otherwise be studied in isolation, and to highlight how regimes increasingly combine suppression and production within integrated systems of control.

At the same time, information control is not only about shaping what publics see; it also involves extracting information from society and elites. Surveillance, monitoring, and infiltration help regimes identify emerging threats, target repression selectively, calibrate propaganda, and anticipate elite disloyalty. Conceptually, these practices are

best understood as an enabling layer that underpins both suppression and production: monitoring helps determine what to suppress, whom to target, and which narratives to amplify, and it can itself generate chilling effects among information providers. I therefore treat information acquisition as cross-cutting rather than as a separate cell in the matrix, while returning to it explicitly when reviewing instruments and their effects.

Table 1. Typology of information control strategies in authoritarian regimes

	Political Content	Non-Political Content
Suppression	Censoring criticism and protest coordination, targeted repression/legal harassment, suppressing investigative reporting/media capture	Moral regulation and cultural control, suppressing “deviant” lifestyles/identities, restricting health/sexuality information
Production	Regime and proxy propaganda, smear campaigns/manufactured consensus, flooding and strategic amplification of preferred frames	Entertainment and “feel-good” distraction

Like other scholars (e.g., Earl, Maher and Pan 2022, 3, Alyukov 2024, 403), this framework does not draw a hard line between actions that occur in digital space and those that result in physical-world consequences. In authoritarian contexts, digital and physical forms of control are tightly intertwined: online surveillance can lead to offline repression, targets often exist in both domains, and offline coercion can shape online discourse. Moreover, state-produced information in digital spaces is often intentionally designed to align with broadcast narratives. Stukal et al. (2017), for example, finds that bots tweeting about the Russia-Ukraine conflict were designed to amplify narratives pushed by state-affiliated television channels. For this reason, the framework treats online and offline domains as interconnected rather than distinct.

Likewise, actions vary in whether they are overt or covert, national or subnational, and implemented through direct state actors versus non-state proxies. These dimensions are not used as organizing axes here; instead, they are treated as cross-cutting attributes that can vary within each cell of the matrix.² Future research could explore how secondary dimensions—such as visibility, scale, and plausible deniability—shape both the efficacy and perception of information control tactics. Pan, Xu and Xu (2024) and Talgatova (2025a) show, for example, that disguising repression can be more effective at dampening public support for dissidents.

² For a more explicit distinction across these dimensions, see Earl, Maher and Pan (2022).

Finally, this review focuses specifically on information control strategies that are regime-authored or regime-sanctioned within authoritarian settings. While democratic regimes also employ some overlapping tools, particularly around the suppression of certain kinds of non-political content, the motivations, institutional constraints, and normative justifications often differ in important ways. Restricting the scope to autocracies is not to deny overlap, but to clarify the strategic logic of information control in contexts where dissent poses a direct threat to regime survival.

3. Instruments of Information Control

In this section, I map the principal instruments of authoritarian information control onto the framework introduced above (suppression vs. production × political vs. non-political content), while noting that many tactics are hybrid. The core point is that while censorship and propaganda remain foundational building blocks, focusing on them alone is increasingly misleading in digital media environments: content abundance and audience fragmentation limit any actor's ability to compel common exposure, pushing regimes toward dispersed strategies (e.g., Lu et al. 2025, 3). At the same time, "old-school" measures have not disappeared; regimes continue to deploy low-tech access controls alongside digital tactics: for example, China has jammed foreign radio broadcasts and restricted the public's ability to receive them, including by banning the sale of shortwave radios altogether (Izgil 2023, 25). For each cluster of instruments, I summarize (i) the core mechanism, (ii) the implementing actors (state, platform, proxy), and (iii) observable indicators that researchers can use to identify these practices; the overview is selective rather than exhaustive.

Suppressing political content

This subsection surveys instruments that primarily operate by constraining the production, circulation, or accessibility of politically salient information. I focus on three clusters of tactics that recur across the literature—censorship, repression, and cooptation/capture—while emphasizing that these instruments are often hybrid in practice and frequently implemented through a mix of state, platform, and proxy actors.

Censorship

By strict definition, censorship belongs in the information-suppression row of the matrix, even though the content being censored is not always overtly political (e.g., Esberg 2020, 821). In what follows, I treat censorship as a mechanism of information suppression, with emphasis on the censorship of politically salient content.

Large-scale empirical study of censorship in authoritarian regimes was pioneered by King, Pan and Roberts (2013). Their foundational work, and its follow-up in King, Pan and Roberts (2014), documents that authoritarian governments such as China's do not censor all dissent uniformly; instead, censorship patterns are consistent with prioritizing

content that is linked to collective action and coordination. This finding has become a reference point for how scholars conceptualize the strategic logic of censorship as a selective, targetable tool rather than an indiscriminate blanket.

Subsequent studies in both Chinese and non-Chinese contexts point to broader patterns of political suppression that extend beyond explicit mobilization calls. Regimes censor criticism and challenges to political primacy, even when content is not directly coordinative (e.g., Shao 2018; Han and Shao 2022; Shao, Liu and Wang 2024; Talgatova 2025c; Liebman et al. 2023, 2431). For instance, Shao (2018) shows that Chinese censors are comparatively more permissive toward certain forms of performance criticism than toward challenges that implicate the Party's political primacy.

Beyond the "what" that is removed, recent work emphasizes how censorship is implemented. Roberts (2018) and Roberts (2020) distinguish among censorship through fear, friction, and flooding. Censorship by fear relies on punitive signals and enforcement contexts; censorship by friction operates by slowing, degrading, or complicating access; and censorship by flooding relies on saturation and noise. Importantly for the typology, friction and flooding frequently blur categorical boundaries in practice: they can be implemented as suppression (raising access costs) while also resembling production-oriented channeling (saturating the information environment).

Censorship is often imagined as a centralized and highly coordinated endeavor, but in practice it is frequently distributed across state-aligned and private actors. In many settings, the enforcement of informational red lines is delegated or informally outsourced, allowing regimes to maintain control without constant direct intervention. Overzealous regime supporters may flag "undesirable" content for law enforcement (e.g., Litvinova 2016; Alekseyeva 2024). Private actors, like media owners, advertisers, and platform operators, may also preemptively remove content in response to ambiguous legal standards, anticipated regulatory backlash, or reputational risk. Beazer et al. (2022), for example, documents "regime-induced private censorship" in Russia, showing that private media firms disproportionately removed advertisements containing anti-regime messages or calls for mobilization even without explicit state directives.

Finally, censorship can take curatorial forms that are difficult to separate from production. Rather than simply eliminating content, selective deletions can help produce a public-facing archive that is systematically incomplete in ways consistent with regime preferences (see Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024, 264). Liebman et al. (2023, 2447), for instance, examines selective deletion of criminal court cases from China's open court platform as a practice that shapes what information remains legible and retrievable in the public record and reinforces state narratives about fairness, rule of law, and competence.

Table 2. Suppressing political content: instrument clusters and observable indicators

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
Censorship	Restricting access to, or circulation of, targeted information (removal, blocking, throttling, downranking)	State agencies; platforms; private firms; “patriotic” publics	Content deletions and takedowns; blocked URLs/ domains; keyword filtering; delayed or throttled access (“friction”); shadow bans/downranking; moderation guidelines and lists of prohibited topics; user reports/flagging activity (e.g., King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2014; Roberts 2018, 2020).
Repression	Coercive constraints on information providers and intermediaries; legal-administrative pressure; staged enforcement	Police/security services; courts; regulators; pro-regime auxiliaries	Arrests/detentions, interrogations, raids; administrative fines; criminal charges; “extremism”/defamation cases; trial publicity and scripted court narratives; televised/recorded confessions (e.g., Fu 2023; Shen-Bayh 2018, 2022).
Cooptation/ Capture	Aligning nominally independent outlets/figures with regime preferences; reconfiguring ownership, incentives, and access	State-linked owners; advertisers, regulators; cultural bureaucracies; proxy organizations	Ownership and leadership changes; creation/expansion of proxy outlets; asymmetric access to subsidies, permits, and advertising; shifts in editorial lines after regulatory pressure; displacement and replacement of oppositional cultural production with sanctioned alternatives (e.g., Beazer et al. 2022; Rahmani 2025; Lerner 2021).

Repression and cooptation

Early studies of repression in autocracies approached it primarily as a human rights phenomenon. Repression involved arrests, imprisonment, torture, and other abuses targeting opposition leaders, activists, and journalists. While that perspective remains essential, a growing body of work also treats repression as an information-management instrument: it constrains information providers and intermediaries, clarifies red lines, and regulates the conditions under which politically sensitive content is produced and circulated.

Repression is typically categorized as suppression, but some forms are staged and scripted in ways that generate public-facing content. Public confessions, as observed recently in China, Russia, Belarus, and elsewhere, provide a clear example: when repression is made visible and staged as a spectacle, it can serve to generate content that reinforces regime narratives. As Fu (2023) argues, confessions can be structured as narrative performances in which dissidents are portrayed through frames of immorality, disloyalty, or corruption. Political trials operate similarly as public performances with informational content: Shen-Bayh (2018, 2022) show that trials can be used to perform legitimacy and portray challengers as violators of public order and decency alongside the administration of punishment.

Cooptation is often understood as an information production mechanism, but it is also central to suppressing political contestation insofar as it reconfigures who can speak, with what credibility, and through which channels. At its core, cooptation aligns nominally independent actors with regime preferences by reshaping incentives, access, and organizational control. Rahmani (2025) introduces the concept of proxy media – outlets not formally owned by the state but run by individuals and companies informally linked to it – and emphasizes how such proxies can operate as regime-aligned intermediaries while maintaining a veneer of independence (see also Trinh and Truong 2025, 345). More broadly, cooptation can be spatial and aesthetic. In the domain of public art, Lerner (2021) documents how subversive street art in Moscow was displaced toward the periphery and replaced in central locations by officially sanctioned murals produced through state-funded initiatives that recruit artists into pro-regime cultural production, often depicting Crimea's beaches or victories from the Great Patriotic War (Lerner 2021, 1773).

Together, these clusters illustrate that suppressing political content is rarely reducible to a single act of deletion or a single coercive episode. It is often implemented as a layered repertoire spanning platform governance, legal-administrative pressure, and the reconfiguration of intermediaries and cultural producers, with observable footprints that range from takedown patterns to ownership changes to staged public narratives.

Suppressing non-political content

This subsection covers instruments that suppress content not primarily framed as oppositional politics, but instead as threats to morality, public order, youth wellbeing, or “healthy” cultural norms. Non-political suppression is often the quadrant that looks most superficially comparable to democratic content moderation, because both regime types regulate pornography, self-harm, and other “harmful” material. Yet in authoritarian settings these interventions frequently involve broader discretionary enforcement, politicized boundary drawing, and the use of both formal and informal sanctions. For example, Chinese authorities are known to crack down on “negative” and “pessimistic” emotions, like for example, expressing an opinion that hard work or education are useless (SCMP 2025). Empirically, non-political suppression may also constitute a large share of observable censorship. In China, for example, non-political content accounts for approximately 70% of censored material in recent estimates (Yang 2025).

Table 3. Suppressing non-political content: instrument clusters and observable indicators

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
Cultural control/moral regulation	Restricting circulation of content framed as immoral, harmful, or norm-violating; limiting cultural genres and aesthetics; regulating entertainment fields	Cultural regulators; courts and police; platforms; broadcasters; advertisers; pro-regime publics	Platform and domain blocks (e.g., adult platforms); removal of posts about pornography/self-harm; genre/appearance directives for broadcast and platforms; campaign-style “cleanups”; bans and licensing restrictions; fines and administrative penalties; compelled apologies; deplatforming/delisting from programs; sponsorship terminations and blacklisting signals (e.g., King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Liu 2024; Amar 2018; Rosenberg 2023).

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
Constituency-aligned censorship	Targeted suppression of materials labeled moral/undesirable in ways aligned with influential social constituencies pressure; staged enforcement	State elites; allied religious organizations; regulators; legislators	Policy proposals and legislative initiatives; official endorsements by religious leaders; “extremism” labeling of lifestyle discourse; enforcement guidance framed as protecting values (e.g., Esberg 2020; iStories 2024).

Cultural control and appeasing supporters

Like democracies (e.g., New Zealand Parliamentary Counsel Office Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015; Australian Government eSafety Commissioner 2026), authoritarian regimes routinely target content related to suicide, self-harm, or pornography. As King, Pan and Roberts (2013, 333) notes, Chinese censors remove posts about pornography at roughly the same rate as those about collective action. These interventions often operate through platform enforcement and access restrictions. For instance, the Chinese government has made platforms like OnlyFans inaccessible within the country (Liu 2024), illustrating a form of non-political suppression implemented via domain- or platform-level blocking rather than item-by-item deletion.

The drive to promote state-sanctioned values in autocracies, however, has also extended to areas that democracies would not touch, such as fan culture and entertainment more broadly. In 2018, China’s State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television issued directives restricting media outlets from featuring guests with tattoos or hip-hop backgrounds; those permitted to appear were instructed to maintain a high “ideological level” and avoid behavior deemed inappropriate for broadcast (Amar 2018). Chinese authorities have also maintained restrictions around K-pop and have increasingly targeted what they label as problematic “fan culture.” In 2021, state agencies released regulations targeting what they described as “feminine-looking men,” and talent shows were restricted for promoting “lapsed morals” and “abnormal aesthetics” (Savage 2021; Ni 2021). As with other non-political suppression tools, these interventions are observable through regulatory directives, broadcast guidelines, platform enforcement actions, and periodic campaign-style “cleanups.”

The pattern of regulating non-political content under the rubric of morality or decency is visible beyond China. In Russia, for example, a widely reported episode in 2023 followed popular blogger Nastya Ivleeva’s party in Moscow’s Mutabor club with an “almost naked” dress code. The episode was accompanied by a fine, lawsuits, public apologies by celebrity guests, and consequences in media appearances and sponsorship arrangements (Rosenberg 2023; Kirby 2023). While the scandal was ostensibly about morality and decency, many analysts suggested that it served as a convenient distraction from more pressing issues, such as the war in Ukraine, economic uncertainty, and growing domestic discontent (Kirby 2023). From an instruments perspective, the

relevant point is that non-political suppression can be enacted not only through formal state penalties, but also through coordinated informal pressure in media and commercial ecosystems—including deplatforming, sponsorship withdrawal, and reputational sanctioning.

Finally, non-political suppression is often intertwined with responses to conservative constituencies. Esberg (2020), writing about Pinochet’s Chile, emphasizes how censorship targeting “immoral” materials can align with conservative constituencies such as Catholic interest groups. Contemporary Russia offers a parallel illustration in the arena of family and reproduction politics. In 2023, Patriarch Kirill publicly endorsed a bill that would classify the childfree lifestyle as an “extremist-oriented ideology,” potentially making public expressions of a desire not to have children legally risky (iStories 2024). More generally, child-bearing and pro-natalist propaganda efforts are becoming increasingly pronounced in Russia (Arkhipova 2026). Regardless of whether such proposals are fully enacted, these examples suggest that the suppression of non-political content is both a form of routine governance in authoritarian regimes and a tool of reinforcing legitimacy, distracting from crisis, rewarding key supporters, and preemptively curbing mobilization potential.

Producing political content

Propaganda

Propaganda is a central production-oriented instrument of authoritarian information management. Here I use the term to refer to the creation and distribution of politically relevant narratives that supply preferred interpretations of events, identities, and hierarchies, and that circulate through both state and non-state intermediaries. In contrast to suppression-oriented tools (deletion, blocking, intimidation), propaganda operates by increasing the supply and visibility of selected frames across media environments.

Table 4. Producing political content via propaganda: instrument clusters and observable indicators

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
Regime propaganda	Producing and amplifying narratives that foreground state achievements, leadership, and official historical frames	State media; ministries; state-affiliated cultural institutions; regime-linked accounts	Recurrent framing in flagship broadcasts and official accounts; scripted, repetitive messaging across outlets; thematic concentration on national history, foreign aggression, and leadership achievements (e.g., Cantoni et al. 2017; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Goode 2025; Waight et al. 2025).

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
Deflectionary/ non-regime propaganda	Producing narratives that shift attention away from the regime by emphasizing external threats, outgroups, or foreign dysfunction	State and proxy media; partisan commentators; coordinated networks	Sustained negative framing of foreign powers or domestic outgroups; synchronized talking points across channels during crises; increased volume of anti- Western/anti-liberal/ xenophobic frames (e.g., Carter and Carter 2021; Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Field et al. 2018; Aytaç 2021; Deng 2025b; Cockerell 2025).
Engagement operations/ networked amplification	Increasing the reach and apparent popularity of preferred narratives through coordinated posting and amplification	Bots; fake accounts; paid influencers; proxy organizations	Bot-like posting patterns; coordinated timing and repetition; clustered account networks; artificial engagement bursts; high share of trending content from regime-affiliated accounts (e.g., Stukal et al. 2017; Lu and Pan 2022).

Identifying propaganda, however, is notoriously difficult. It often requires immersion in the strategic logic of political elites and media operators: which narratives are being constructed, how, why, and for whom. Some elements of propaganda are easily observable. Nationalism, for instance, is a longstanding and widespread theme in authoritarian political messaging, appearing prominently in China (e.g., Lu et al. 2025, 9; Cantoni et al. 2017; Mattingly and Yao 2022), Russia (e.g., Goode 2025), Mali (e.g., Bleck and Michelitch 2017), and many other contexts. In Russia, new patriotic myths continue to be produced in the wake of the war in Ukraine and mounting military casualties (e.g., Novaya Gazeta Europe 2025). From an instruments perspective, the relevant feature is not any single story but the repeated reproduction of recognizable narrative elements across outlets and time.

Compared to the propaganda of the last century, often delivered via speeches, party newspapers, or rote repetition of historical myths, contemporary propaganda in Eurasian and other authoritarian contexts is frequently technologically mediated and distributed across platforms and intermediaries. In Russia, Stukal et al. (2017) finds extensive bot activity in Twitter discourse about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, consistent with the use of coordinated amplification as an instrument. In China, propaganda is increasingly delivered through scripted and repetitive content across both state and

commercial media: Waight et al. (2025) documents the persistence of such messaging in daily publications, while Lu and Pan (2022, 80) finds that a substantial share of Douyin's trending videos (42.5%) were produced by regime-affiliated accounts. These studies illustrate observable footprints of production-oriented control: repetition, cross-channel synchronization, and disproportionate presence of affiliated sources in high-visibility spaces.

A conceptually useful, though rarely formalized, distinction is between regime propaganda and non-regime propaganda. A working distinction for this review is as follows: regime propaganda foregrounds the regime and its performance (state achievements, leadership legitimacy, narratives of national greatness), whereas non-regime propaganda shifts attention toward external actors or internal outgroups, often emphasizing threat, resentment, or dysfunction elsewhere. Regime propaganda includes familiar forms such as curricula and flagship broadcasts; in China, for instance, the Communist Party's nightly newscast *Xinwen Lianbo* frequently mixes historical reminders of foreign aggression with messages about current leadership achievements, weaving regime and national messaging together (Mattingly and Yao 2022, 1577). Non-regime propaganda often relies on negative framing of foreign powers, frequently liberal democracies, as a recurring narrative target (e.g., Carter and Carter 2021; Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Field et al. 2018; Aytaç 2021; Deng 2025b; Cockerell 2025). Carter and Carter (2021, 25) emphasizes the importance of this approach, and a growing body of research confirms it. Rozenas and Stukal (2019) shows that during economic downturns, the Russian government increasingly blamed external forces, particularly Western countries, for domestic hardship. Field et al. (2018), Aytaç (2021), and Deng (2025b) also document how leaders across different authoritarian contexts rely on anti-Western, anti-liberal, or xenophobic narratives to redirect blame and sow distrust in alternative models of governance. Anecdotal evidence also confirms that regimes, like Russia and China, do this routinely: for example, during LA fires in early 2025, the Russian and Chinese media portrayed these events as solid evidence of the failure and dysfunction of the US government and society (Cockerell 2025).

In practice, propaganda also frequently overlaps with disinformation and conspiratorial messaging, particularly when narrative production incorporates exaggerated or fabricated claims. While the boundary is not always clear, one pragmatic way to distinguish instruments is to treat propaganda as narrative framing and saturation (which may or may not involve falsehoods) and disinformation as a subset of production that depends more directly on demonstrably false claims. Online engagement campaigns are one modality through which digitally mediated propaganda is injected

and amplified. Such campaigns rely on bots, fake accounts, and paid influencers to distribute and boost preferred narratives in public discourse.³

Propaganda, then, is no longer limited to carefully crafted state broadcasts or textbook narratives. It is adaptive, diffuse, and often disguised as grassroots commentary. These practices frequently operate alongside, and sometimes in coordination with, suppression-oriented tactics discussed above. The line between top-down and bottom-up, state and non-state, is increasingly blurry. What remains clear is that propaganda, in both its regime-affirming and deflectionary forms, continues to play a critical role in shaping how people understand, and misunderstand, the political realities around them.

Producing non-political content

Distraction and entertainment

One strategy of information control in autocracies is the deliberate expansion and privileging of non-political content, especially entertainment, soft news, and “positive” human-interest material. Such content is a way of structuring the overall informational environment (e.g., Roberts 2018; Lu and Pan 2021). Rather than foregrounding explicit political messaging, it relies on content composition, pacing, and placement to increase the volume and visibility of non-sensitive material that will engage broad audiences. One prominent variant is flooding: the release of large volumes of content that increases the density of non-sensitive material in attention spaces. Roberts (2018) identifies flooding in the Chinese context as part of a broader repertoire of censorship and information management, emphasizing that saturation strategies can coexist with, and sometimes substitute for, more direct removals. From the perspective of this typology, flooding is best treated as a hybrid: it is a production-oriented tactic (more content) that can nonetheless function as suppression through saturation, depending on timing and placement.

A second variant centers on entertainment and engagement-optimized soft content. Lu and Pan (2021) show that Chinese propagandists frequently rely on entertainment and human-interest material to generate engagement, and they note that clickbait formats are often used because they reliably attract attention without occupying the limited space reserved for more explicit political messaging (Lu and Pan 2021, 2). In this sense, the instrument is not merely the existence of non-political content but its systematic prioritization in high-visibility slots and its design features (headline style, pacing, emotional tone) that make it competitive in crowded attention markets.

³ As both academic research and journalistic investigations suggest, similar engagement tactics may also be used by opposition actors. Sanovich, Stukal and Tucker (2018, 436), for example, finds evidence of both pro-regime and pro-opposition bot activity in the Russian–Ukrainian context. Russian independent media outlets such as *The Insider* have reported on “elves,” described as a project allegedly sponsored by the Free Russia Foundation, in which individuals were paid to promote opposition-aligned narratives on social media (*The Insider* 2023).

Relatedly, Lu and Pan (2022, 78) and Zhu and Fu (2024) emphasize the prevalence of “positive energy” stories and soft news in China’s broader guided media ecosystem: content designed to uplift, entertain, or soothe appears repeatedly across outlets and platforms. As an instrument, this is observable through persistent thematic streams and the routinized production of morale-oriented formats, rather than through occasional one-off campaigns.

These dynamics are not limited to China. Simonov and Rao (2022, 263) documents, for Russia between 2013 and 2015, patterns in which government-controlled outlets attracted visitors through non-sensitive pages (e.g., celebrity gossip) that served as common entry points before users encountered more overtly political coverage. From an instruments perspective, the distraction becomes a gateway: soft content draws users in, and some may end up consuming regime-aligned political messaging as a result.

Table 5. Producing non-political content via distraction and entertainment: instrument clusters and observable indicators

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
Flooding/saturation	Increasing the volume of non-sensitive content and signals in high-attention spaces; saturating feeds and search results with alternative material	State and proxy content producers; platform-affiliated accounts; coordinated networks	Sudden or sustained increases in volume of “soft” content around sensitive periods; repetitive posting; synchronized amplification; feed/search saturation with non-political material (e.g., Roberts 2018).
Clickbait and engagement-optimized soft content	Producing entertainment and human-interest content designed to maximize clicks and time-on-platform; allocating attention slots away from sensitive topics	State-linked producers; commercial outlets under constraints; platform ecosystems	High share of human-interest/celebrity/curiosity content among high-visibility items; use of sensational headlines; systematic presence of such content in proximity to or during politically sensitive windows (e.g., Lu and Pan 2021; Simonov and Rao 2022).

Instrument cluster	Core mechanism	Implementers	Observable indicators
“Positive energy”/ soothing narratives	Producing uplifting, reassuring, or morale-oriented content that emphasizes harmony, optimism, or social cohesion	State media; commercial media under guidance; regime-affiliated accounts	Recurring tropes of uplift and harmony; branded “positive energy” content streams; prevalence of soft-news formats within official or guided media ecosystems (e.g., Lu and Pan 2022; Zhu and Fu 2024).
Problem-revealing entertainment	Embedding controlled acknowledgments of social problems within entertainment narratives under strong narrative supervision	State-linked entertainment producers; broadcasters; regulators	Television/streaming dramas that depict corruption or social problems alongside state-centric story arcs; regulator-approved releases; recurring plot structures consistent with guided framing (e.g., Deng 2025a).

Finally, entertainment can itself serve as a controlled medium for presenting social problems within strongly managed narrative boundaries. Deng (2025a) introduces the concept of “problem-revealing entertainment,” where regimes permit depictions of issues such as corruption within entertainment formats while maintaining tight narrative control, framing itself as competent and committed to solving the problem. A notable example discussed by Deng (2025a, 11) is the anti-corruption TV drama *In the Name of the People*, which became China’s most-watched show in 2010, where problem depiction coexists with supervised story arcs. As an instrument, this strategy is observable in the content features of entertainment products (problem acknowledgment paired with regulated resolution scripts) and in the regulatory environment that governs what types of “problem revelation” are permissible.

Taken together, these findings solidify that soft news, entertainment, and click-driven content can also be intentionally crafted by the authoritarian machine. They shape attention, control emotional tone, and create environments that are less conducive to dissent. If propaganda seeks to directly shape belief, distraction works by shaping focus. And in information environments where attention is scarce and easily manipulated, controlling focus can be just as powerful as controlling content.

4. Effects of Information Control

States can target dissent through multiple pathways. Broadly speaking, information control may seek to constrain either the consumers of information, by shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or the producers of information, by limiting what gets said, who can speak, and how widely it can circulate. While these audiences are often interconnected, distinguishing between the two can help clarify the mechanisms and intended outcomes of different information strategies. Keeping the overarching purpose of information management in mind—shaping public perception and minimizing political threats—it is helpful to conceptualize the downstream effects along this intuitive divide: the effects on the public, and the effects on information providers.

Effects on the public behavior and attitudes

Assuming that a central goal of authoritarian information control is to curb public dissent in all its forms, much of the literature evaluates these strategies through a fairly narrow lens: do they reduce protest participation, criticism of the regime, or anti-government sentiment? Do they, conversely, boost support for the autocrat? The findings, however, are far from uniform. As Earl, Maher and Pan (2022, 10) aptly summarize, “virtually every conceivable relationship has been found,” with different studies pointing to evidence of chilling effects, backlash, indifference, and even mobilization. In other words, the effects of information control are anything but straightforward.

When and for whom censorship is effective. By its very design, censorship reduces the availability of alternative sources of information and raises the costs (cognitive, logistical, and reputational) of accessing them. This is especially evident in traditional media environments, where regimes exert control over print, broadcast, and other centralized platforms (e.g., Roberts 2018; Larreguy and Marshall 2019; Roberts 2020). In the digital age, these dynamics persist but take on new forms. Roberts (2020) identifies two critical insights that help explain both the effectiveness and the limitations of censorship. First, awareness of censorship is a prerequisite for resilience to it. People cannot push back against, work around, or compensate for what they do not recognize as missing. Second, demand for censored information matters: individuals who are more motivated to seek out blocked or distorted content are more likely to overcome barriers to access.

Importantly, both of these factors—awareness and demand—highlight the uneven effects of censorship. Not everyone is aware that censorship is occurring, and among those who are, not everyone cares enough to act on it. These asymmetries have a profound implication: censorship fragments the public, creating divides between those who actively seek unfiltered information and those who passively accept the curated reality provided by the state.

As King, Pan and Roberts (2013) show, this may be why regimes often censor meta-discussions about censorship itself, treating criticism of censorship with the same urgency as posts about collective action or pornography.

This heterogeneity in exposure and motivation also dampens coordination. Even if some citizens are well-informed and willing to act, they may hesitate if they believe others remain uninformed or indifferent. The result, as works like Little (2017) and Steinert-Threlkeld (2017) suggest, is a chilling effect that extends beyond individual compliance to collective paralysis. In this light, even when censorship is imperfect and resilience exists, its strategic success lies in its ability to inhibit shared understanding and synchronized dissent, not in eliminating dissent entirely, but in keeping it isolated, fragmented, and ultimately ineffective.

Propaganda's effects and its limits under salience and crisis. What does appear consistently in the literature is that information control, especially in the form of propaganda, can shape collective action decisions in multiple ways. Propaganda can dampen public support for protest, or lower individuals' willingness to participate in dissent, through several mechanisms. It can emphasize regime strength and stability (e.g., Huang 2015, 2018; Trinh and Truong 2025), shift beliefs about others' actions, like convincing people that no one else will protest even if they are personally willing to do so (e.g., Huang and Cruz 2022), delegitimize challengers by portraying protesters as violent, unpatriotic, or externally manipulated (e.g., Edwards and Arnon 2021); or force disengagement or apathy (Alyukov 2022). Alyukov (2024) also finds that synchronization of content across multiple sources (e.g., TV and digital sources) may increase the convincingness of information by triggering the consistency heuristic in the consumers of this information. These efforts may reduce dissent not by eliminating discontent, but by making mobilization seem futile, dangerous, or socially unacceptable.

That said, the effectiveness of propaganda is highly dependent on context and form. Dominating or "absurd" propaganda, marked by over-the-top claims, frequent repetition, or visible manipulation, may be less effective in persuading the audience and more costly to maintain. Unlike subtle messaging that flies under the radar, overt propaganda needs constant reinforcement to preserve the illusion of regime strength and suppress counter-narratives. As with censorship (Roberts 2020, Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024, 268), propaganda might be most effective when it is low-salience, backgrounded, and hard to detect. When persuasion is no longer plausible, autocrats instead rely on flooding information channels to create an informational vacuum, where the absence of credible alternatives leaves regime narratives unchallenged.

It also implies that propaganda has clear limits, particularly in times of crisis or policy failure. When regime narratives become inconsistent with lived experience, such as during economic downturns, public health emergencies, or visible state repression, propaganda loses its persuasive grip. In fact, contradictory messaging or rapidly shifting narratives can breed confusion, cynicism, or backlash. For example, Yang and Zhu (2025) shows that conflicting propaganda during crises can undermine trust rather than build it.

In short, while regime propaganda often “works” by shaping perceptions and expectations, it does so best under conditions of stability and low salience. When reality pushes against the edges of the narrative, especially in times of uncertainty or crisis, its limits are quickly revealed.

Negative propaganda: redirecting blame and shaping threat perceptions. While regime propaganda (i.e., content that highlights the government’s legitimacy, success, or strength) has received considerable attention, recent scholarship increasingly highlights the effectiveness of non-regime or “negative” propaganda as well. This type of messaging shifts attention away from domestic performance and instead directs criticism outward, toward foreign actors or rival political systems.

For instance, Deng (2025b) finds that such negative propaganda, focused primarily on discrediting liberal democracies or portraying foreign governments as hypocritical, violent, or in decline, successfully increases public resentment toward those foreign rivals. However, it has little to no effect on improving the domestic population’s perception of their own regime. In other words, it can foster distrust of others, but it doesn’t necessarily translate into genuine support for the autocrat.

That said, this tactic can still serve strategic goals. For example, security threat narratives which paint external actors as dangerous or threatening can activate nationalist sentiment and justify aggressive policy decisions. Krishnarajan and Tolstrup (2023, 4) show that exposure to such narratives significantly increases Russians’ support for the use of military force against neighboring countries. This type of propaganda likely played a central role in shaping domestic support for the invasion of Ukraine, not by generating enthusiasm for the regime, but by portraying military action as necessary and justified.

In a related finding, Trinh and Truong (2025) demonstrate that anti-protest propaganda, in line with hard or dominating propaganda (Huang 2015), can also effectively suppress dissent. Rather than delegitimizing protesters themselves, this form of messaging signals the regime’s strength, surveillance capacity, and willingness to crack down. This, in turn, discourages individuals from participating in protests, not necessarily because they view protesters negatively, but because they believe the cost of dissent is too high.

In sum, while non-regime propaganda may not boost regime approval directly, it plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes, redirecting blame, and reinforcing the status quo. By cultivating fear, resentment, or fatalism, it helps autocrats maintain control.

Distraction and entertainment as forms of attention control and soft persuasion. Entertainment, often dismissed as politically benign, can be a powerful tool of persuasion in both authoritarian and democratic contexts. Recent evidence suggests that when entertainment media are designed to subtly convey regime-friendly narratives, they can significantly influence public perception.

Deng (2025a) introduces the concept of “problem-revealing entertainment” in authoritarian settings that acknowledge the existence of societal problems, such as corruption or inequality, but ultimately frame the state as capable and committed to solving them. Deng finds that exposure to such media content draws viewers into emotionally engaging storylines and makes them more likely to internalize the intended narrative: that while problems exist, the government is strong, just, and effective enough to fix them. This dynamic echoes findings from democratic contexts, where entertainment media have been shown to shape political opinions and even electoral behavior. For instance, Kim and Patterson Jr (2025) show that viewers of *The Apprentice*, Donald Trump’s reality television show, were more likely to vote for him in the 2016 Republican primary. The show portrayed Trump as a decisive, competent businessman, a persona that translated into perceived political credibility among viewers.

A similar pattern emerges from Italy, where Silvio Berlusconi’s media empire, Mediaset, dominated the airwaves during the formative years of many voters. Scholars have found that early exposure to Mediaset’s programming was associated with lower levels of civic engagement and cognitive sophistication later in life, which in turn correlated with higher support for Berlusconi’s populist platform (Durante, Pinotti and Tesei 2019).

Together, these findings underscore a critical point: entertainment is not apolitical. Whether in a democracy or an autocracy, it can subtly reinforce messages about who is competent, who deserves power, and what kinds of social realities should be accepted. In authoritarian regimes in particular, where overt propaganda may provoke skepticism, entertainment provides a softer vehicle for shaping public attitudes and legitimizing the regime.

Effects on the information providers

Chilling effect on information providers. Repression can have lasting consequences on the information produced by independent media, even when it fails to alter the tone or stance of coverage in the long term. For instance, Paskhalis, Rosenfeld and Tertytchnaya (2022, 163) provides a cautiously optimistic account from the case of TV Rain, one of Russia’s few remaining independent television channels. Following government pressure, the channel exhibited a temporary shift toward more neutral or less confrontational coverage. Yet over time, the sentiment of reporting returned to pre-repression levels, suggesting some resilience among independent outlets.

However, sentiment alone may not tell the full story. Drawing on a broader dataset of repressive incidents, my own work (Talgatova 2025b) finds no significant shift in the tonality of coverage following attacks on journalists, but does observe a decline in the number of sensitive articles produced by targeted individuals. Overall productivity also drops, indicating that repression can shrink the breadth and depth of the independent media environment even if it doesn’t completely silence dissent.

An important element in this work is the emphasis on vicarious effects: observed repression—witnessing colleagues or peers being targeted—can be as damaging as direct repression. The chilling effect does not require personal victimization. Suggestive evidence in Talgatova (2025b) points to a broader, anticipatory caution among journalists operating in a repressive environment, one that affects editorial decisions and output even in the absence of direct threats.

Complementing this perspective, Dorff, Henry and Ley (2023) examine how criminal violence against journalists affects media reporting in Mexico. As the threat of violence increases, journalists begin to alter their reporting practices, often avoiding explicit references to organized crime groups or publishing vague, non-specific stories. Some adopt anonymized bylines or share authorship collectively, deploying protective strategies to reduce personal exposure while still publishing sensitive content. These adjustments can reduce the personal risk for journalists, but also contribute to a more constrained and less informative public discourse.

Together, these findings highlight a critical dilemma: repression may not always change the message, but it often changes who speaks, how often, and what gets said at all. Even resilient outlets and journalists may strategically adapt to survive, and in doing so, the space for robust, independent journalism gradually contracts.

Broader effects

Information production strategies erode trust in all information, both true and false.

As many human rights advocates across international non-profit organizations have noted, the rise of generative AI and deepfakes in particular poses serious risks to the information environment by eroding trust in all content, not just fabricated material (Mukherjee 2024; Barari, Lucas and Munger 2025). While much of the public discourse focuses on the disruptive potential of generative AI, especially in authoritarian contexts, it is important to recognize that older, more traditional forms of information control can produce similar effects. For example, as Rahmani (2025) shows, the “accumulated brand capital” of co-opted or captured media outlets can become a double-edged sword: when these seemingly independent outlets begin promoting regime-aligned narratives, they do so with a level of credibility that can be more persuasive and ultimately more destabilizing than official state media.

At the same time, some scholars caution against overstating the impact of generative AI, at least in terms of its effects on political outcomes. According to Simon and Altay (2025, 6), concerns about mass manipulation through generative AI may be overblown. Their argument is twofold: first, mass persuasion is inherently difficult regardless of the technology used; and second, the information ecosystem is already oversaturated, which limits the marginal impact of even highly sophisticated AI-generated content. Although their study focuses primarily on democratic settings, these insights remain relevant for understanding the role of AI in authoritarian contexts as well: the oversaturation of the information market has been noted by other authoritarian regime scholars (Lu et al. 2025), which highlights the growing importance of managing attention.

More broadly, several studies suggest that fake news is not as pervasive as originally feared, and that individuals are more capable of recognizing falsehoods than early panic suggested (see Angelucci and Prat). Still, while isolated claims may be exaggerated, the structural risks posed by AI-enhanced disinformation networks should not be dismissed. A striking example comes from a recent audit of leading AI chatbots, which found that these systems repeated Kremlin-originated falsehoods 33% of the time (Sadeghi and Blachez 2025). This was not accidental, as Russian disinformation networks appear to be deliberately “contaminating” the training data used by AI models. Even though sites affiliated with disinformation networks, like Pravda, have virtually no human audience, they flood the web with interlinked content that boosts their visibility in search results. By producing a high volume of repeated false claims across ostensibly independent websites, the disinformation network increases the probability that large language models encounter and absorb these narratives during training, ultimately incorporating them into chatbot outputs.

This is especially concerning given that nearly all Americans interact with AI-powered products in their daily lives, with 64% unaware they are even doing so (Maese 2025). As such, the prospect of “LLM grooming” by authoritarian actors should be taken seriously as part of the broader toolkit of information control.

Transnational information control is context-dependent. Authoritarian governments that rely on disinformation at home have increasingly expanded their efforts abroad, engaging in transnational information management to influence foreign publics through coordinated propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Countries like China, Russia, Iran, and Venezuela have all been implicated in such operations. One of the most prominent examples remains Russia’s interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in which the Internet Research Agency (IRA) orchestrated a large-scale influence campaign using fake accounts and bots to shape discourse on platforms like Twitter (Eady et al. 2023). However, the effectiveness of these efforts remains contested. In the case of the 2016 IRA campaign, Eady et al. (2023) find limited evidence that direct exposure to Russian disinformation meaningfully shifted political attitudes or behavior among U.S. users, suggesting that while reach may have been vast, impact was likely marginal.

More broadly, the success of transnational disinformation appears highly contingent on several contextual factors. Studies point to the importance of the message content (Erich and Garner 2023), the origin and credibility of the source relative to the target audience (Erich and Garner 2023), and the characteristics of the recipients themselves, such as prior beliefs, ethnic identity, political orientation, and levels of media literacy or cognitive sophistication (Eady et al. 2023; Zilinsky et al. 2024). Research in democratic contexts confirms that susceptibility to disinformation varies widely. Not all users engage with or believe false content; some can identify and reject it, especially when they consume diverse media or possess the tools to critically evaluate what they encounter.

In sum, transnational propaganda and disinformation are well documented, but their effects are hard to measure because they often operate through indirect outcomes, like, for example, agenda-setting, trust erosion, perceived consensus, and sharing behavior, rather than immediate belief change. Their effectiveness is also likely conditional on the host environment: media pluralism and polarization, the credibility of local intermediaries (including diaspora outlets), and the extent of platform enforcement and fact-checking capacity. The next step for scholarship is to move from existence proofs to mechanism identification: specifying which channels carry influence and which observable signatures distinguish successful from unsuccessful campaigns. This, in turn, would make it possible to evaluate concrete countermeasures, like platform friction, labeling, network disruption, prebunking, and rapid-response verification, and to assess when they meaningfully reduce reach or credibility.

5. Emerging Methods

Studying non-democratic regimes has always posed significant challenges. State-provided data is often unreliable or selectively released, while conducting fieldwork in repressive environments can expose researchers and their collaborators to serious risks. And yet, despite these constraints, recent methodological advances, particularly in computational text analysis, have opened up new avenues for systematically studying media manipulation in authoritarian settings, and behavioral science more generally (Feuerriegel et al. 2025). As La Lova (2025) highlights, the development and application of text-as-data techniques has greatly enhanced our ability to analyze information control in regimes where transparency is deliberately absent.

Moreover, a number of experimental studies have uncovered covert political activities, like propaganda, censorship, repression, and surveillance (for more detailed overview, see Pan, Druckman and Green 2021). However, as Pan, Druckman and Green (2021, 552) cautions, experiments in such environments face significant validity concerns: the plausibility of experimental treatments is a challenge when the object of study can rarely be manipulated.

Concerns about external validity are also linked to the question of where the existing knowledge originates. Much of what we know about censorship and media control in authoritarian contexts comes from research on China, which operates one of the most sophisticated and well-documented systems of information management in the world (Waight et al. 2025, 2). A quick glance at Google Scholar reveals the extent of this focus: there are roughly twice as many publications that mention both “information control” and “China” compared to those that mention “information control” and “Russia”, despite the latter also being a central case of modern authoritarian governance and a role model for other regimes (e.g., Costa Buranelli 2020). While such counts are admittedly crude and shaped by platform heuristics, they do suggest a broader scholarly emphasis on the Chinese context.

However, China’s success in building a robust information control system is hard to replicate. As Pan (2017) shows, much of China’s capacity to manage information flows stems from the structure of its domestic internet ecosystem, which has long been dominated by homegrown firms. This insularity has allowed for a level of control that regimes elsewhere often struggle to achieve. Across the Eurasian continent, for instance, authoritarian governments have tried but largely failed to mimic China’s digital authoritarianism. In Russia, repeated attempts to build a “sovereign internet” have been met with limited success (Belyaeva 2024). The state-mandated Max messenger, for example, which authorities now require to be pre-installed on all new smartphones, has proven dysfunctional and unpopular in practice (Meduza 2025). Still, this has not

dampened enthusiasm for digital sovereignty projects. In August 2025, for instance, Kazakhstan’s president Qasymzhomart Tokayev ordered all government agencies to migrate to Aitu, a state-backed messenger platform, under the stated goal of protecting citizens’ personal data (Adamovich 2025).

These examples underscore a broader pattern: while the aspiration to control digital information is widely shared among authoritarian leaders, the capacity to do so effectively remains uneven and highly contingent on structural factors, including market dynamics, technological expertise, and popular resistance. While China offers a uniquely sophisticated and well-documented model of information management, its exceptional infrastructure and dominance of domestic tech firms make it difficult to replicate elsewhere. Complementing this research with studies from other authoritarian regimes can help identify the limits of the Chinese model and reveal the diverse strategies, constraints, and adaptations that shape information control beyond China. This broader comparative perspective is essential for developing a more robust and generalizable understanding of how authoritarian regimes manage information.

6. Conclusion and Emerging Questions

This review has emphasized that authoritarian information control is best understood not as a single tactic (censorship, propaganda, repression), but as an evolving portfolio of strategies deployed across audiences and domains. As digital environments expand the speed, scale, and granularity with which information can be shaped, some long-standing questions take on new urgency, while others emerge from technological and sociopolitical shifts. In closing, I highlight two sets of issues that, together, point to the next frontier for the field: how regimes assemble and coordinate informational tactics, and what these strategies imply for their effectiveness, limits, and broader diffusion beyond authoritarian contexts.

The architecture of information control

A central theoretical puzzle concerns how regimes compose, sequence, and coordinate multiple informational tactics across audiences and domains to shape public perceptions. While censorship, propaganda, and repression have often been studied in isolation, contemporary autocracies increasingly combine them in real time. This raises basic questions about structure. Are tactics across quadrants—suppression vs. production, political vs. non-political—deployed simultaneously, or sequenced in patterned ways? Are some tools primarily reactive (e.g., censorship in response to sudden mobilization), while others are preventive (e.g., distraction, strategic amplification, or preemptive narrative inoculation)? And when we observe multiple tactics co-occurring, does this reflect genuine complementarities, or simply ad hoc behavior in the face of uncertainty?

These questions also open space for typological thinking. Do regimes exhibit distinctive information styles that persist over time? Might some lean more suppressive, while others rely more heavily on productive engagement? Can regimes be classified based on dominant quadrant combinations across issue areas, platforms, or degrees of support? For example, governments may deploy political-suppressive tactics during episodes of contention, while leaning on non-political production—public health messaging, patriotic entertainment, or problem-revealing narratives—during crises that threaten perceived competence.

Another underexplored but increasingly important question concerns the role of non-state actors in carrying out or reinforcing information control. Much of the literature focuses on state-led efforts, yet digital ecosystems have enabled new classes of participants: patriotic influencers, trolls, “concerned citizens,” and private media firms may all contribute to suppression or production—sometimes independently, in a bottom-up fashion (e.g., Hong et al. 2025), but often aligned with regime goals. These blurred boundaries warrant closer theorization, especially because they complicate inference about intent, attribution, and accountability.

Emerging AI tools make these questions more urgent. Like earlier communication technologies, AI is politically ambivalent: it can lower the costs of expression, translation, documentation, and circumvention, but it can also expand the state’s capacity to monitor, classify, and manipulate information at scale. For authoritarian regimes, the significance of AI may lie less in creating wholly new forms of information control than in altering the speed, cost, and coordination of existing ones. Generative systems can produce persuasive narratives, synthetic images, localized propaganda, and targeted distraction, while classification systems can support surveillance, content filtering, and the identification of dissent. AI may therefore tighten the link between suppression and production: regimes can detect emerging grievances, generate counter-narratives, amplify loyal voices, and flood contentious spaces before criticism consolidates. Rather than treating AI as a stand-alone tool of censorship or propaganda, future research should examine how it reshapes the architecture through which multiple tactics are combined.

Consequences, resistance, and the blurred boundaries of control

Understanding the effects of information control and the prospects for resistance remains central to the field (e.g., Roberts 2018). Yet the digital era also complicates a conventional assumption that only regimes possess the capacity to suppress. The question that seems interesting brings up the analogy of “fighting fire with fire”: while opposition actors clearly engage in counter-messaging and narrative production, their ability to constrain information is typically presumed to be minimal. In practice, however, the boundaries can be more fluid than this binary suggests.

In the Russian context, for example, investigative journalists reported that the Free Russia Foundation employed individuals to write pro-opposition comments on social media—operatives dubbed “elves” to contrast with state-sponsored “trolls.” More generally, even without institutional coercive power, pro-opposition brigading tactics—ridicule, coordinated swarming, or doxxing—may cross into suppression when aimed at silencing regime-aligned, or anti-opposition, voices. These practices raise difficult empirical and normative questions: How should we conceptualize bottom-up information control? What are the ethics of resistance when power asymmetries are unclear or contested? And what are the downstream effects of these tactics on polarization, participation, and the credibility of oppositional claims?

These questions also have implications that extend beyond authoritarian settings. Patterns associated with democratic backsliding increasingly involve the same repertoire of information strategies, even when deployed under the cover of legalism, national security, or platform governance. As elected incumbents weaken institutional checks, the line between “authoritarian” and “democratic” information management can blur: governments may pressure platforms, expand surveillance and legal risk for journalists, cultivate aligned media ecosystems, and normalize coordinated amplification or harassment by partisan networks.

Democratic backsliding can unfold even without overt censorship. When citizens no longer share baseline trust in institutions that produce and validate public information—news outlets, courts, oversight bodies, or even professional expertise—new revelations have less political force. Scandals become harder to sustain, evidence is more easily dismissed as partisan, and uncertainty itself becomes politically useful. In such environments, incumbents and aligned networks do not need to impose a single dominant narrative. Simply managing attention can be sufficient to keep publics fragmented and to increase the background level of doubt. The result is an informational climate in which resignation is a likely outcome. Collective action becomes harder to coordinate not only because people disagree, but because they cannot confidently infer what others believe, what is true, or what consequences will follow. The lesson is not that backsliding democracies become indistinguishable from full autocracies overnight, but that the mechanisms of information control and the incentives they create for both authorities and citizens combine more easily than the regime labels suggest.

Taken together, the field’s emerging agenda is twofold: to theorize how information control tactics combine, substitute, and form distinct portfolios, and to assess their consequences, limits, and diffusion beyond authoritarian regimes. Moving past a binary view of information control as exclusively authoritarian is essential for understanding both authoritarian resilience and the fragility of democratic information environments.

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