

* * * EXTENDED ABSTRACT * * *

Information-based Governance and Cross-border Information Flows: The Structural Alliance Between Domestic Dissent and Foreign Subversion

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This paper seeks to elaborate on the concept of governance through an investigation of cross-border information flows, arguing that scholars can supplement well-established models of governance, e.g. Ostrom (1990), with what is here called “informational governance”. Informational governance refers to the use of communication rather than rules to achieve social order. Awareness of informational governance suggests some counter-intuitive insights, such as that subversion can contribute to good governance and that there can be a shared interest between domestic dissenters and rival foreign states.

The strategy of this inquiry is to study subversion, as practiced by states in the international arena. Subversion refers to activities intended to undermine governance in a country by influencing domestic politics (RAND, 2020, p.2). The actor undertaking subversion is usually understood to be a foreign state, but subversion may also have a domestic dimension, when domestic actors attempt to undermine their society’s governing regime. Subversion illuminates governance: subversive actors target those elements of society that are essential to governance, and by following their actions the external analyst may gain insights into what those essential elements of governance are. Just as an external analyst might study demolition experts tasked with bringing down structures and so learn about what makes structures stand, political analysts can study programs of subversion to see what makes governance function (and how it can be undermined.)

The empirical part of this research consists of an examination of RT, Russia’s cross-border news and public affairs network (online at www.RT.com.) Launched in 2005, RT has an annual budget

of approximately \$300M and operates production studios in Moscow, London, and Washington. Accepting the claims that Russia has subversive intent and that it created RT as a tool of subversion (RAND, 2020; ODNI, 2017), we investigated RT's content to see what information is subversive. Specifically, we investigated the credibility of guests on RT's flagship show, *Crosstalk*, evaluating credibility by whether guests were affiliated with well-established Western institutions or had been guests on well-established media outlets (a method adapted from an earlier study of the US television show *Nightline* (Croteau & Hoynes, 1994).) Significantly, we found that the majority of guests were credible, i.e. they either held positions in well-respected universities (e.g. Georgetown University) or they had been deemed sufficiently credible by other media outlets (e.g. CNN) to make guest appearances there.

The key finding here is that RT is not obviously disseminating lies. Instead, we characterize RT as a "dissent aggregator". RT gives a platform and an amplifier to members of society who criticize their government and its actions. A list of some of RT's guests gives a sense of what voices are empowered. Guests include: Seymour Hersh (a journalist who exposed torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq), Edward Snowden (an NSA employee who exposed the surveillance activities of the National Security Agency,) Theodore Postol (an MIT professor who exposed the failures of Patriot Missiles,) and Julian Assange (the founder of the Wikileaks web site that published the documents leaked by Edward Snowden.) Day after day, week after week, RT brings these voices of dissent into the living rooms and onto the computer screens of its viewers.

This suggests that the prevailing wisdom about subversion (and about governance) might be wrong. That prevailing wisdom is that RT subverts by telling "brazen lies" that "subvert democracy" (Freedlan, 2018; Erlanger, 2017), presumably because such lies would undermine the (legitimate) governance that prevails in the West. The evaluation here indicates that RT subverts governance by disseminating critical but credible voices.

If we accept the premise that RT's intent is subversive, how then can we explain the use of non-lies to undermine governance? What does this tell us about governance? Can truth subvert governance?

A somewhat diffuse literature on informational aspects of governance – what we call “informational governance” -- suggests answers. This literature argues that governments employ information to govern and that this informational governance is sometimes patently illegitimate, is sometimes contingent, and is sometimes simply fragile. The titles and key concepts of these works give a sense of their perspective; they include: *Why Leaders Lie* (Mearsheimer, 2013), *Political Hypocrisy* (Runciman, 2008), *Narrative and Social Control* (Mumby, 1993), “the market for loyalties” (Monroe Price, 2002), *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 2006), “strategic narrative” (Roselle et al. 2014), and *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Edelman. 1988). Most of these works just cited are by authors calling themselves realists, i.e. they study informational governance whose legitimacy is suspect but note the practical necessity of such tools. Other works of informational governance that are more condemnatory include *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), *Necessary Illusions* (Chomsky, 1995), and “hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971).

Informational governance includes a variety of practices. At its most extreme, it may include lying, i.e. disseminating demonstrably false information to the public in order to achieve social order and to make and execute policies. Or it may employ some combination of filtering and amplifying, altering the portfolio of facts available to the public in such a way as to influence public perceptions and judgments. Informational governance may include symbolic acts and spectacles that build confidence for governors in the governed. Or it may employ narratives that help publics make sense of complex events and steer them to support certain actions and conclusions. Of course, there are many information-based governance practices that are legitimate, such as leaders giving speeches to persuade the public of a certain course of action. It is the less legitimate practices that are of interest here. These practices are illegitimate, insofar as they operate in a non-transparent manner. As such, they are vulnerable to exposure.

Scholars of such informational governance can be divided into realists and what can be called purists. Realists note the problems of legitimacy, but argue that information-based techniques are justifiable for their practical benefits. Well-intentioned governors may persuade, spin, narrate, and perhaps even lie to the governed, since that is necessary for effective governance. Purists reject informational governance altogether, rejecting illegitimate means even if employed toward good ends. Purists, in any case, often see a conflict of interest between governors and governed and argue that informational governance allows malintentioned governors to exploit the governed.

In either case, for a foreign state wishing to subvert a rival, informational governance presents an opportunity. Informational governance can be subverted -- by truth. The foreign state may expose lies promulgated by governors, it may amplify facts that have been filtered out, it may critique or ridicule narratives that build social solidarity, and may promote alternative, divisive narratives.

This subversion-by-truth may explain why an entity like RT disseminates the views of credible guests. Insofar as the societies it targets use informational governance, RT can use truth (non-lying) for subversion. RT disseminates a steady stream of critical voices that attack the dominant narratives and the oft-cited facts that constitute the official government line. (It bears noting that the same analysis can be made of other states and their cross-border news operations. Most notably, the US operates various cross-border news operations, such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and these outlets give voice to dissenters and truth-tellers in those societies.)

The ethics of such information-based subversion is ambiguous. To the extent that the realists are correct that all governance involves some illegitimate informational techniques, then subverting informational governance may be a destructive act. If political hypocrisy is unavoidable, then attacking it from abroad is at best a cheap shot and at worst a means to

undermine governance and create instability and anarchy. In this view, foreign support for dissent is subversive of social order.

On the other hand, if the purists are right that illegitimate acts by governments should be exposed no matter what, then the provision of cross-border news doing that is a good thing. In this latter case, subversive information from abroad may strengthen domestic reformers pushing for better governance. Here we may see a structural alliance between domestic dissenters, who oppose their government, and foreign subverters, who oppose that same government. Foreign provision of truthful information, even if done with subversive intent, can be good for governance. In this view, foreign support for dissent is constructive, helping the targeted society reform (or overthrow) its untruthful governors.

A topic for future research might be to identify a metric for the ethics of cross-border information provision. Some societies may be so fragile or so divided that the realist perspective on governance (that some illegitimate acts are necessary) holds true. In such a society, subverting governance – even if done with truthful information – may be unethical, as it will cause chaos and conflict. Other societies, on the other hand, may be sufficiently stable that they can reap the benefits of dissent while avoiding its destabilizing effects. Cross-border information flows may contribute to positive political development.

For example, recent civil wars in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya suggest that their governance was too fragile to withstand cross-border assistance, including media assistance. Exposure of their governments' illegitimate aspects led to a collapse of governance and violent conflict. In contrast to this, stable democracies like the US, Great Britain, and European countries may benefit from cross-border support for dissent (or at least not suffer from it.) RT (or Seymour Hersh) seems unlikely to provoke a civil war in the US. In between those two extremes might be Russia (which recently emerged from social-economic collapse) and China (which recently experienced explosive development). These countries might benefit from cross-border

informational subversion, although they might be vulnerable to destabilization from truth-telling.

Informational governance merits greater attention. By following the practices of those who would undermine governance, we can see the importance that they put on informational governance. Theory may lag practice here, and the opportunities for new scholarly insights in informational governance may be great.

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